NOVEL
05
WRITTEN BY
Yomu Mishima
ILLUSTRATED BY
Monda
TRAPPED IN A DATING SIM
THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS

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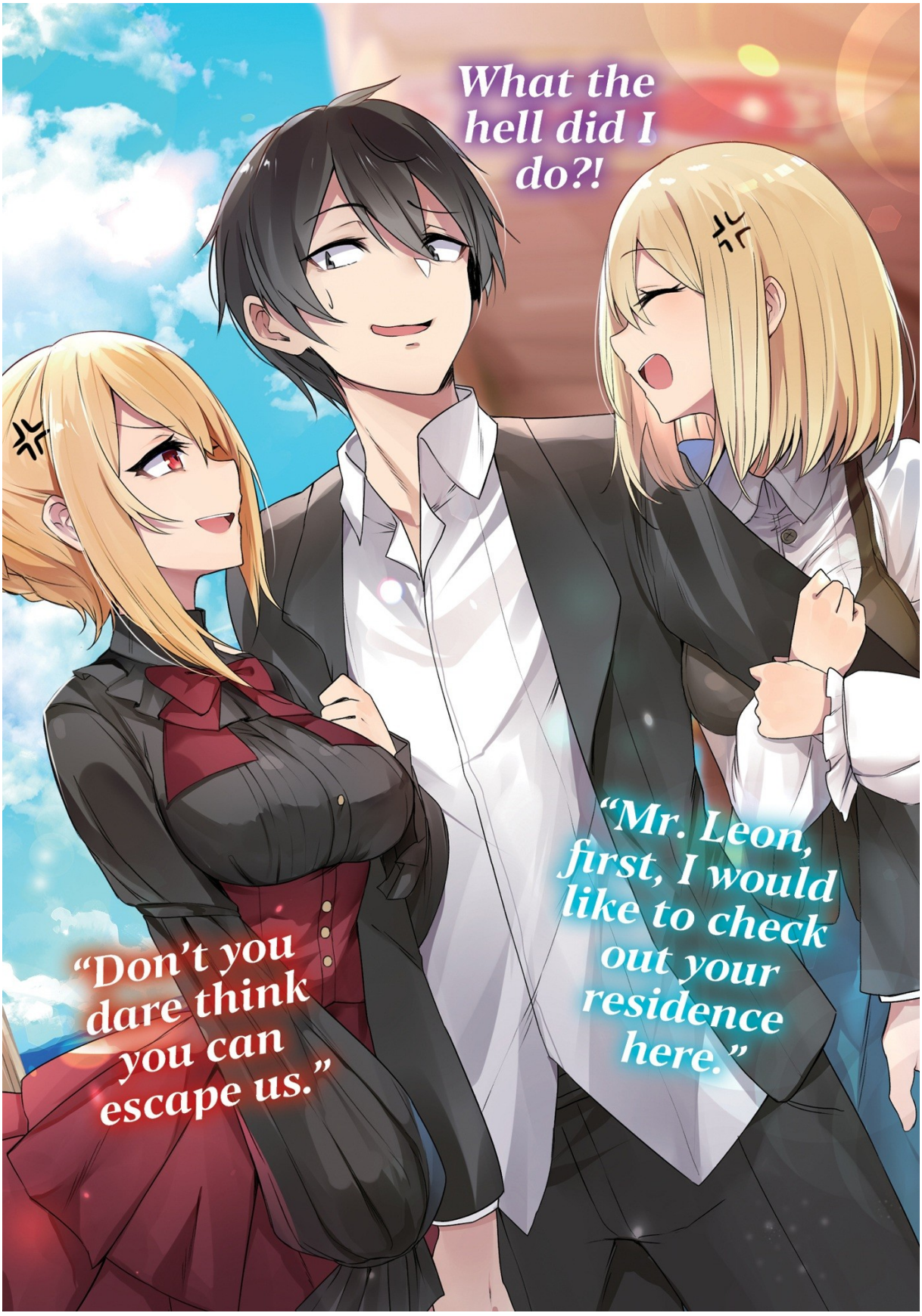
What the hell did I do?!
"Mr. Leon, first, I would like to check out your residence here."
"Don't you dare think you can escape us."

Trapped in a Dating Sim
The World of Otome Games is Tough for Mobs

NOVEL
05

WRITTEN BY
YOMU MISHIMA

ILLUSTRATED BY
MONDA

Seven Seas Entertainment

TRAPPED IN A DATING SIM: THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS (LIGHT NOVEL) VOL. 5

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Illustrations by Monda

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TRANSLATION: Alyssa Orton-Niioka
COVER DESIGN: Hanase Qi
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner
PROOFREADER: Rebecca Scoble
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: E.M. Candon
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori
PRINT MANAGER: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
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THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS.

Prologue

AUGUST WAS FAST APPROACHING in the Alzer Republic where I, Leon Fou Bartfort, was studying abroad. At present, I was in an academy classroom, stretching in my seat.

“It’s finally over!”

Dusk had fallen, painting the sky outside a beautiful shade of orange. This was probably my own bias speaking—one born from the sense of freedom that came from completing my supplementary lessons—but the scenery dazzled me more now than it ever had before.

I wasn’t alone in the classroom; the others were fellow exchange students from Holfort Kingdom.

“Haaah, finally we get to enjoy summer break.” Marie Fou Lafan’s shoulders slumped. She didn’t look the least bit excited. Odd, given that she struck me as the type to get fired up at her second chance to go through school and enjoy the long holidays that came with it.

Carla Fou Wayne, a girl who felt indebted to Marie, was quick to reassure her friend. “Lady Marie, it’s our long-awaited summer break. Why aren’t you looking forward to it more?”

Where Marie was short and petite, Carla was of fairly average height, with long, straight, navy-blue hair.

Marie turned her gaze to a group of boys happily chatting amongst themselves. These were also Holfortian exchange students, or as I’d dubbed them, the idiot brigade.

“What a novel feeling, having a break without any plans.” Julius Rapha Holfort smiled, his short navy-blue hair shining.

“Yes, so much happened during our previous summer break. Do you not have anything lined up, Your Highness?” asked Jilk Fia Marmoria, Julius’s foster brother. They had been raised together from a young age, so they had a unique master-subordinate relationship.

Greg Fou Seberg folded his arms behind his head in contemplation.

“Wonder how I should spend this month off…?”

All these boys were former heirs of their respective houses. If things had gone to plan, their elevated status would have meant their itineraries were packed even during the summer months. Sadly for them, they’d been disowned, so they were free of such obligations. Apparently, they enjoyed that, since they were all anticipating summer vacation.

Even the normally quiet Chris Fia Arclight excitedly joined the conversation. “I have an interest in the republic’s weaponry, so I would like to go on a bit of a tour to see their armaments. Hopefully they have museums and the like.”

Visiting museums was a noble's idea of a break. In my previous world—before I'd reincarnated into this stupid otome game, that is—I would have passed my days lounging about, doing absolutely nothing.
The last to comment was Brad Fou Field, who had an oh-so-helpful suggestion. "None of you have solid plans for our break? In that case, why don't we borrow an airship and go on a cruise around the republic?"
Hearing the word "cruise" come out of his mouth just went to show how filthy rich these losers were. He said it in the same casual, cool way a normal person might say "Let's go for a picnic!"
Julius's eyes lit up. "That's a brilliant idea. We did come all the way here to study abroad. Sightseeing wouldn't be a bad choice. Although we only have a month, which might make for a hasty trip, we should still be able to get a decent look around the country."
Did he seriously intend to use the entire month to sightsee? That certainly was an extravagant way to spend his time, but it was ultimately meaningless.
I turned my gaze back to Marie. She regarded the Moronic Five with an icy glare, being far more in touch with reality than they were.
Flustered by Marie's scowl, Carla asked, "Wh-what is it?"
"Carla, do you really think I'll be able to fully enjoy my time off when I have to spend it looking after the boys? I had a certain level of freedom during lunch while school was in session, but starting tomorrow, I'll have to babysit them from morning to night." Any excitement Marie might otherwise have felt was sapped right out of her.
Only children got to enjoy summer vacation. Their parents, meanwhile, dreaded it. Since the school functioned as a form of day care for Julius and the other boys, Marie had some reprieve during the day, but soon, looking after them would once more become a full-time job.
If Marie's expression was anything to go by, being a mother was rough, especially considering she was basically the sole caregiver to five brats.
Marie let out a dry laugh. "Aha ha ha! And starting tomorrow, I'll even have to prepare lunch for them too. That means our food expenses are going to skyrocket!"
This was the sorry end for a woman who had reincarnated into an otome game and aimed for the reverse-harem ending. I had to shake my head, wondering how the sister from my previous life could have ended up so miserable.
I didn't purely pity her. The only reason she had five jerks to mind was because her own greed had driven her to pursue the aforementioned reverse-harem ending—but I would have been lying if I said I didn't feel any empathy at all.
At the same time, it *was* a little entertaining. The way she talked made her sound like a beleaguered mom. It was a fitting punishment for her foolhardiness.

I grinned to myself as I watched her—at least until someone came and pinched my cheek.
“Tha hurds!” I protested, my complaints coming out garbled.
The girl responsible had long, soft hair tied in a side ponytail with a unique gradient scheme that started blonde up at the top but turned pink at the tips. She had a tomboyish air, but her appearance was more that of a playgirl. All this belied how sociable and kind she actually was. No one would have guessed it by looking at her, but she was skilled at housework too. She was one big pile of contradictions.
“What are you smirking about?” Noelle Beltre—whose real name was Noelle Zel Lespinasse—asked with a smile.
Although I hadn’t known it at first, the otome game I had been reincarnated into had *multiple* sequels, and she was the protagonist of the second installment.
I pulled away from her grasp and rubbed my throbbing cheek. “I’m grinning because I get a kick out of Marie’s situation. Don’t tell me you don’t find it just as entertaining as I do. She’s a prime example of how trying to net yourself a harem won’t necessarily lead to happiness.” I chuckled.
Noelle sighed, exasperated. “I think you’re taking it a bit far to call a living, breathing person’s life an ‘example’ of anything.”
“My bad. But I still can’t help laughing.”
Considering all the grief Marie had given me countless times, I thought I at least deserved to laugh at her. I was also helping finance her daily expenses. If anyone had the right to poke fun at her, it was me.
“You really do have a twisted personality.” Noelle pulled a face, but the smile soon returned to her lips. She leaned in toward me until our noses were inches apart.

“Hey, all that aside, I need you to come with me to the store on the way home.”
“What for?”
“I’m staying at Rie’s place too, and she’s been looking after me, so I feel like I need to contribute occasionally.”
“I don’t think you really need to worry about that,” I said. *So she’s calling Marie “Rie” now, huh?*
The two of them had grown pretty close, which wasn’t surprising. Since the issue with Pierre, Noelle had been staying at our—okay, Marie’s—estate. I was still living there too, namely because of the troubling mark on the back of my right hand. I had covered it up with bandages and played it off as a wound, but beneath all that was the Guardian’s Crest—proof that the Sacred Tree had chosen me. To be more precise, the Sacred Tree Sapling, which I had secured during my conflict with Pierre, had done the choosing. Ordinarily, the Sacred Tree chose a Priestess first; the way I heard it, the Priestess then selected a Guardian to serve with her. Needless to say, I’d been caught off guard by this whole situation.
I glanced behind me to where Jean sat. He was a male student whom I’d met and befriended here at the academy. We were all in supplementary classes since our group had been temporarily unable to attend school during Pierre’s reign of terror. Thus, we’d been offered additional instruction to make up for what we missed.
“Are you headed straight home after this? If so, wanna go with me to the store?” I asked Jean, eyeing Noelle’s reaction.
Maybe it was just my imagination, but she seemed to be pouting.
“I have something planned after this,” Jean smiled as he turned me down. “I’m going to return to a relative’s house—the one that has been looking after me. They were pretty worried and wrote a letter asking me to visit.”
“Oh, uh, okay.”
“Besides, I wouldn’t want to be a third wheel.” Jean shot a glance at Noelle. Her cheeks turned red.
Not too long ago, I could have sworn Noelle had feelings for the guy. Game-wise, Jean was like me: a mob—an insignificant background character, a.k.a., not one of the love interests. I couldn’t have held it against her if she fell for that kind of person, but alas, it seemed I was mistaken.
This is a real pickle.
Since Noelle was the second game’s protagonist, she needed to pair up with one of the aforementioned love interests. If she didn’t, the whole world would be in danger. Yes, you read that right. The whole world was in real danger of falling apart because of some teenager’s love life or lack thereof.
This world really is garbage.
All that aside, our current situation wasn’t ideal. All the love interests from the second game—that is, Noelle’s potential partners—had little to no contact with her. At the top of the list of candidates was Loic Leta Barielle,

who was supposed to be the canon choice. But somehow, he had become Noelle's stalker instead.

I had heard he was a bit possessive in the second game, but he'd turned out way more dangerous than I pictured. Noelle abhorred him because of it, to the point that she didn't even consider him a possibility.

The next possible love interest was Narcisse Calce Granze, a professor at the academy. Bit of an eccentric, that guy. Obsessed with archaeology, he frequently left the school to do fieldwork. While he was a bit preoccupied with his hobbies, he wasn't bad. Even so, at present, he had almost no interaction with Noelle. Saying he wasn't in the running would have been an understatement. If you brought up his name to Noelle, she'd probably say, "Professor Narcisse? Oh yeah. I guess we do have a teacher here by that name, don't we?"

In order to trigger Narcisse's route, the protagonist had to select his class for special study before her second year of school—otherwise all possibility of dating him evaporated.

Speaking of chances going poof, she'd missed yet another opportunity: Hugues Toala Druille, a third-year student. If the protagonist didn't meet the prerequisites of his route during her first year, then it would be too late by her second. Since Noelle had failed to do this, he was also off the table.

The fourth candidate was Emile Laz Pleven. He was so easy to date that players had nicknamed him Easy-Pick Emile. Alas, Noelle's twin sister, Lelia Beltre—a girl who had reincarnated into this otome game world like me and Marie—had already claimed him for herself. Yes, that little charlatan had swiped him from right under the protagonist's nose.

With those four candidates a total bust, the only remaining option was Serge Sara Rault, but he wasn't even attending the academy right now. It was bad enough that Noelle had no opportunity to meet the man, but his household also had a strained relationship with Noelle. Serge's adoptive father was Albergue Sara Rault, the game's final boss, and his adoptive sister was Louise Sara Rault, the villainess. On top of that, the Raults had once wiped out Noelle's family—the Lespinasses. Trying to hook up Noelle and Serge with all that standing in their way would be a monumental task.

Frankly put, the love interests were all duds. And now, despite *not* being her lover, I had been chosen as the sapling's Guardian.

Yeah, we're screwed no matter how you spin it.

As I was lost in thought, Noelle reached over and pinched my shirt, coaxing me to my feet. "Hurry up, let's go."

"Yeah, yeah. Quit pulling on my clothes."

As we left the classroom, Noelle paused to speak with Marie.

"Hey, Rie, don't worry. We'll buy the seasonings you ran out of earlier."

Marie's expression grew strained. "Uh, thanks. Actually, Bro—I mean, Leon. When you two get back, there's something I'd like to talk to you about." She nearly referred to me as her brother before hurriedly correcting herself.

Wait, forget that part—she's got something she wants to talk about?

If it wasn’t something she could speak about here, it probably had to do with our future.
“Okay, got it,” I said. “We’ll hurry home.”
Marie glanced briefly at Noelle before turning her gaze back to me.
“Getting dinner ready will be a pain, so you two eat while you’re out. Our conversation can wait ’til tonight.”
“Uh, okay. If you say so.”
She was acting awfully strange. In fact, I had been noticing it more and more lately.
Nonetheless, Noelle and I left to do our shopping.

***

That night, after we finished buying groceries, we ate at a restaurant with an open terrace. Our table was lit by candles and had three large plates spread around it. Smaller plates sat in front of each of us, as well as a tiny bread basket.
I had ordered some boiled lobster, which was giving me no end of grief.
“This thing is hard to eat,” I muttered.
Not long ago, after the incident with Pierre, the republic had given me compensation money for all the trouble one of their own had caused. I’d decided to splurge by coming to this fancy eatery, only to find the cuisine egregiously difficult to consume.
“I can’t keep watching you struggle like that. Here, give it to me.” Noelle snatched the crustacean. Unlike me, she had no trouble dismantling the beast. After extracting the meat, she piled it on a plate and handed it back. She grinned proudly as she reached for a napkin and wiped her hands.
“That’s incredible. You dissected that lobster with such ease.”
“Dissected? I guess you could technically call it that. Well, what do you think? It should be easier to eat now, right?”
I popped some of the meat in my mouth. Ah, tender and juicy.
The terrace was rather quiet, but the merry voices of other customers spilled out from within the restaurant, joined by a chorus of waiters verifying orders. Light trickled out of the windows and onto the terrace, accompanied by the streetlights glowing faintly nearby. That left our table dim, but not so dark that we had to squint. In fact, it all had a certain atmosphere that I quite liked.
“This is really good. Noelle, you try it too.”
“I’ll feel ashamed of myself if you keep treating me to meals all the time. Don’t you think you’ve been blowing your money a bit recently?”
With the Pierre situation over, I wanted to enjoy my time in the Alzer Republic. We still had a mountain of problems on our plate, but that was a separate matter.
“Most of what I’ve been buying are gifts for the people back home. My family’s been kicking up a fuss, you see.”

And by family, I meant two insufferable culprits in particular, i.e., my two sisters—the older one, Jenna, and the younger one, Finley. They'd been pestering me about a variety of rare goods. I already felt obligated to send gifts to the other people who had looked after me, so I probably had been splurging. All these expenses were necessary, though; I wasn't simply spending money to spend it.

Noelle eyed me skeptically. "But I don't see how you needed that brand-new tea set. And what about that other thing you purchased—the one that had its own special bag? How much did that set you back?"

"Aha ha ha… Noelle, why don't you try this? It's delicious."

Okay, okay, I'd seen this one amazing tea set for sale. Since I had the change to afford it—and because I desperately wanted it—I made the purchase. However, that was the only thing I'd bought for myself. Everything else was pretty much daily necessities.

"Leon?" Noelle's voice was stern, indicating she wouldn't abide my change of subject.

"Fine. Altogether, it was about a hundred grand."

And that wasn't in Japanese yen, mind you. If we were to convert that amount to yen, it would be at least ten million, or somewhere around there.

Turned out that was far more than Noelle had anticipated, because her brows shot up to her hairline. "And didn't you buy some expensive tea leaves and snacks before that?"

"Well, I wanted to have a tea party with my new set! This is my hobby, you know! Besides, *you* drank the tea and ate the snacks too!"

After all, she was the only person I'd invited.

"W-well, I mean, you know how it is…and it *was* delicious."

Tea was one of my few pleasures in this world. Maybe the people here saw things differently, but as a Japanese man who'd lived in the 21st century, I thought my interests unimpeachable.

"It's my only hobby," I said.

Noelle realized she had taken the wind out of my sails. "I-I'm sorry," she said hastily. "I took it too far. But I admit, I didn't expect tea to be your hobby."

I couldn't hold that against her. My previous attitude had been, "Tea? Oh yeah, *totally* fascinating, I'm sure." Meeting Master had completely changed my values.

"If you attended one of my master's tea parties, I'm sure you would understand too."

Noelle watched me enthuse as she resumed eating. "Yes, I've heard that numerous times now."

True. We'd had this same conversation more than once.

As I went back to eating my lobster, a waiter approached.

"Would you like to order anything else?" he asked.

Noelle seemed content with what we had at the table.

“I’ll have your most expensive juice,” I said, trying to make myself sound like some kind of pompous moneybags.
The waiter forced a smile. “Um, I regret to inform you that we do not carry particularly ‘expensive’ juice.”
Yeah, I’d learned that by looking at the menu. “I was only kidding. Give us two more drinks then, the same as what we ordered before.”
Noelle seemed fine with my order, and as soon as the waiter left, she said, “I see you don’t drink alcohol at all. Rie and the boys seem to. You must be the odd man out even in the kingdom.”
In this world, people were legally allowed to consume alcohol starting at the age of seventeen. The age of adulthood was actually fifteen, at which point you were expected to make judgment calls on your own—including whether or not you drank. Personally, I just wasn’t that interested in liquor.
“I decided I won’t drink ’til I’m twenty.”
“But why?”
“It’s my own personal rule.”
It wasn’t that I was morally opposed or anything, but it didn’t sit right for me to drink before then. After all, Japan’s legal drinking age was twenty, so I’d resolved to wait until then.
Noelle smiled, but there was something forlorn about it.
“What’s wrong?” I asked.
She shook her head, her side ponytail swaying with the motion. “I always dreamed about being able to enjoy a meal like this.”
I immediately thought of her younger twin. “Are you referring to Lelia?”
Her expression soured.
She sure lets her emotions show on her face.
“You suck at reading the air, Leon, and you tend to be a bit dense. Not that I really mind that much. But sisters are different, and to begin with, Lelia isn’t into this kind of thing.”
“Huh, that so?”
Had something happened between them? Well, knowing Lelia, I wouldn’t have been surprised to learn it. She was the entire reason for our current predicament.
“Well, as long as you’re having fun, that’s all that matters,” I said.
“What?” Noelle stared at me. Then she beamed, her face the most beautiful I had ever seen. “I was just thinking, you eat as if you really enjoy your food. Anyway, let’s figure out what we’re going to do next—”
Noelle was about to confirm our schedule when a flurry of footsteps came toward our table. It wasn’t the waiter this time, though the face was familiar. The second I saw her, I grimaced.
Lelia quirked a brow at me, setting her hands on her hips. She had no intention of hiding her displeasure. “You don’t have to act so annoyed by my presence.”
Noelle’s forehead crinkled. She turned her face away. “Lelia, what do you want?”

An awkward atmosphere descended between the sisters. The guests at nearby tables turned their attention our way, made curious by the commotion.
I heaved a sigh. “Speak of the devil, as the saying goes. Well, have a seat, then. Want anything to drink?”
Lelia turned her chin up at me. “No need to trouble yourself over me. I already have someone waiting.”
I glanced behind her. Emile—a boy with silky blue hair—was standing nearby, clad in an expensive-looking suit. I smirked.
“What, here on a date?”
“Oh, shut up! More importantly, I’ll be going to your house tonight.”
Noelle’s face hardened. “Lelia, I have told you multiple times, don’t just barge in.”
“We have important things to discuss, so butt out.”
After saying her piece, Lelia promptly marched off. Emile shot us an apologetic look, bowing before hurrying after Lelia.
As whispers surged around us, the waiter finally saw his opportunity to approach and set our drinks down. “Apologies for the wait.”
I yanked out a couple of bills and threw them on his tray—compensation for all the trouble we’d caused. He was more than happy to excuse himself after that.
Noelle’s eyes fell to her lap.
Lelia was like Marie and me—someone who had reincarnated into this otome game from the real world. She also had intimate knowledge about the second installment in the series.
“I guess we should finish eating and go home,” I said.
“Yeah.”
Since Noelle was down in the dumps now, I thought it best to end things early.

***

When I returned to the manor, Marie and I settled down in the dining hall to discuss the future. A clock hanging on the wall informed me that it was 11 p.m.
“Lelia sure is taking her sweet time.”
I was growing more and more irritable at her tardiness, tapping my finger rhythmically against the table as we waited. Marie let a yawn slip.
“She’s on a date, right? I’m sure they’re probably busy having fun. In fact, maybe it will go so well that she won’t even make it today.” Marie started rubbing at her eyes, drowsiness getting the best of her. As far as she was concerned, there was no point in worrying if Lelia didn’t show.
“Don’t you think it’s incredibly rude of her to piddle our time away and leave us hanging?”

“I already told you: If they’re having a good time on their date, they’re probably going to go for home base. Oh, sorry. I forgot how incompetent you are. You wouldn’t know what that’s like.”
My nose flared. “What’s that supposed to mean, huh?”
“That you’re a wuss when it comes to Noelle. In fact, remember your two fiancées back in Holfort? You were a coward with them, too, when they professed their feelings to you.”
Angie and Livia had grown impatient waiting around for me to make up my mind and finally confronted me directly to make their affections clear.
Y-yeah, I can’t really argue the point. I was a bit of a coward then.
But Noelle was a completely different matter.
“Okay, but what’s this about me being a wuss with Noelle?”
Marie pulled a face. “You really are a scumbag.”
“And you’re really going to call me that without giving a reason? Tell me then, who is it that’s receiving money for their daily expenses from this scumbag, huh?”
Tears sprang to Marie’s eyes as she protested. “This is the exact kind of thing that makes you a scumbag!”
While we bickered, Luxion drifted into the room, his round, metallic body bobbing and red eye flickering.
“Master,” he said, “even I cannot deny her assertion that you are a coward.”
“Hey!” I protested. Some servant you are, always having a smart mouth.
“More importantly, your guest has arrived.”
I glanced outside. Lights glared through the glass—car lights.
“Is that Lelia?” I asked.
“It appears Emile escorted her here,” said Luxion.
He sure is a nice guy.
Marie left for the front entrance and came back a few minutes later with Lelia in tow. Outside, the lights disappeared as Emile’s car pulled away.
Lelia took her seat while Marie poured us drinks from the tea pot she’d prepared. Lelia took her cup and immediately launched into the heart of the matter.
“All right, so what are we going to do now?”
Marie and I exchanged looks. We both snorted with laughter before shrugging.
Lelia looked back and forth between us as her brows drew together. She smacked her hand against the table. “What’s with your attitudes?!”
Marie stared down at her. “Don’t you see any irony in this? You suddenly appear and ask us what *we’re* going to do when we’re only in this mess because of *you*. Don’t you get that?”
Lelia shot to her feet. “I was doing just fine on my own until now! You’re the ones who stirred the pot! My sister and Loic were doing just—okay, well, maybe that part wasn’t going too well…”
Even Lelia was disturbed by Loic’s behavior. Calling him a stalker was putting it nicely. The guy was basically a criminal.

Wait, I guess those are pretty much the same thing.
At any rate, Noelle's disgust toward him was at a level of instinctual contempt. It would be far too monumental a task to push the two toward a romantic relationship now. Giving up was the wiser option.
I passed some sweets to Lelia so she could enjoy them with her tea.
"I looked into all of her potential romantic options, but they're all dead ends," I said. I shot a look at Luxion, expecting him to relay the details.
"In regards to Narcisse, there is a high likelihood that he will leave the academy entirely by the end of this year. As for Hugues, he already has an engagement of his own. Emile is out of the running entirely since he's already in a relationship with you, which only leaves Serge. Currently, we don't know his whereabouts and lack any meaningful information on him."
It was less a problem of Luxion being incapable of gathering information on Serge and more that he saw it as a waste of resources. I had no doubt that if he committed himself, he could find the guy, but what then? Noelle avoided all mention of the man—or rather, all mention of House Rault. The chances of those two hooking up were slim.
Lelia frowned. "Serge, huh…?"
"Do you know something?" I asked, hoping she could shed some light on the matter.
"He always wanted to be an adventurer, and he often slips away from the academy." Lelia was being cagey. Like that was a real answer!
"I've already heard that part."
When the Raults had invited me to their house before, they'd told me about Serge's interest in adventurers.
"Well, um… I figured I'd need a backup for Loic, so I got in close with Serge."
Marie tilted her head. "Then why were you so fixated on Loic until now? Don't tell me that you screwed things up with Serge?"
"Don't put it like that! I didn't screw things up, okay? Well, no, I sort of did."
She's not making any sense. Which is it? I frowned. "Okay, back up. So something happened with Serge, right?"
Lelia gave up beating around the bush. "I had no trouble getting acquainted with him. But his sister didn't want us involved with the Raults, and Serge himself wasn't interested in my sister."
On that last point, their feelings were mutual—Noelle wasn't interested either. Although, if that was all, I didn't see the problem.
"And then he…told me that he liked me." Lelia's cheeks flushed.
Marie clicked her tongue, disgusted.
Uh… Well, this is terrifying. I don't think I want to get involved.
"I can't believe you," Marie snapped. "After all that crap you gave me about having a reverse harem, here you are seducing two different men! Any trust I might have given you just went out the door, never to return!"

“Oh, please. I don’t want to hear that from a temptress who went after *five* different guys! We’re not even in the same league!”
For argument’s sake, two was definitely not as bad as five. Mathematically, Lelia’s romantic pursuits weren’t as egregious as Marie’s.
Not sure that makes her look any better though…
Regardless, we’d hit a dead end.
“Well, we’re screwed then,” I said.
Lelia thrust a finger in my direction, tears welling in her eyes. “Don’t you say that! You’re the one who messed it all up by becoming the Guardian!”
I really wish she’d stop foisting the responsibility on me. She got us into this situation way before I became anything. I snorted. “It’s not my fault. Even assuming I hold some of the blame, we’ve only got these problems because of you.”
Lelia’s face turned red.
Great, she’s lashing out even though she’s in the wrong.
“Are you trying to say this is all me?!”
“Duh, of course it is. The only reason you got backed into this corner is because you made the wrong choices to begin with. Besides, if you had taken Noelle’s feelings into account, we wouldn’t be in this mess. And if you’d engineered opportunities for her to get to know Hugues and Narcisse, we might at least have other options.”
Unable to defend herself, Lelia grimaced.
Well, I’m sure she wants to verbally rip us apart for our role in screwing up her master plan.
Nonetheless, it was still her fault things had wound up this way.
“Besides, what about you?” I asked. “You secured Easy-Pick Emile for yourself. If you were thinking properly about the circumstances, you should have avoided him.”
Behind me, Marie cheered. “You tell her! Tear her to shreds! Make her feel like absolute garbage, like you do when you lecture everyone else!”
Jeez, what kind of person do you take me for? Back to the point. “Easy-Pick is the one safe option we could have used to recover from any situation. You should have left him alone. Don’t you realize you’re the inventor of your own predicament?”
“Couldn’t you be nicer?!”
“No. Don’t assume that all guys will be unconditionally nice to you simply because you’re a girl. I have no reason to fear being blunt anymore!” I declared. *That’s right! There’s nothing for me to be scared of. I have two kind fiancées waiting at home for me. I am above fear!*
Lelia’s gaze dropped to her feet. “I do think I flubbed things,” she mumbled. “I never dreamed Loic would turn out to be this bad. In our first year, I thought everything would be fine between them and took comfort in that.”
In other words, she’d let her guard down, and that had led to disaster. Now our impending doom was fast approaching. That said, hashing it out any further wouldn’t provide a solution.

“All right, let’s actually talk some strategy about what we’re going to do from here on out.” I glanced over at Luxion.
“Very well. I shall explain a few possible plans we might—Master, there’s an emergency.”
“What is it?”
“An airship from the kingdom is fast approaching, and Angie and Livia are on board. Cleare appears to be with them as well. Apparently, it’s urgent.”
“Urgent?!”
Had something happened back in the kingdom? That seemed the only reason they would come all the way here.
Shit.
Luxion’s main body—an enormous spaceship—was located nearby here in the republic. Unless he straddled the border, he wouldn’t be able to check in on the kingdom in real time.
“What’s their ETA?” I asked.
“It appears they will be arriving in the harbor tomorrow morning.”
“D-did something happen back home?!”
“I cannot answer that. Cleare did not send me any reports beforehand.”
What in the world was going on in Holfort?

Chapter 1:
Two-Timing

THE TROUBLE HAD STARTED before summer break. Some sort of fuss had kicked up in the distant Alzer Republic, but back home in the Holfort Kingdom, information was sparse. Leon's two fiancées were concerned about him and his other companions.

One of these fiancées was the headstrong Angelica Rapha Redgrave, whose shining, golden hair was pulled into a braided updo. The other was Olivia. Unlike Angelica—or Angie, as her intimates called her—Olivia was a commoner who had been granted special permission to attend the kingdom's academy. She was also the original protagonist in the first installment of the otome game series. A cute girl with a flaxen bob, she normally exuded a gentle air.

Right now, however, her aura was grim, and her face was blank. She and Angie were in their cabin, waiting for their ship—the *Licorne*, which was nearly identical to the *Einhorn*—to land in the Alzer Republic. Since they were engaged to Leon and he was studying abroad there, they had taken advantage of their summer break to make the trip.

Angie's arms crossed beneath her enormous breasts, and she irritably tapped her index finger. "I wonder when the republic will begin their infamous 'inspection.' We've been sitting here for over an hour now. Don't you find it frustrating to have to wait when our destination is right before our very eyes?"

Olivia—or Livia, as she preferred—nodded, glancing out of the window. "I can see they've approached, but they don't seem to be moving. What are they doing?"

Like its predecessor, the *Einhorn*, the *Licorne* was unique in that it had a horn protruding from its stern. The biggest difference between the two was the color; the *Licorne* was painted white, like the glaring light of the sun. Luxion had done most of the basic design, but Cleare had seen the vessel to completion. She, like Luxion's remote terminal, had a small, round body—except hers was white instead of metallic, and her eye was blue rather than red. The differences didn't end there; their personalities were diametrically opposed, and Cleare possessed a feminine voice.

"Perhaps they're admiring the *Licorne*'s beauty?" Cleare suggested.

Angie left her seat, glaring coldly through the windowpane. "They sure are taking their time. Cleare, contact their security ship. Tell them that if they keep us waiting any longer, we'll force our way in."

"Oh, my, that's quite extreme. I know you want to see the master as soon as possible, but aren't you being a bit hasty?"

There was no warmth in Angie's smile. "I simply can't help worrying about him. He's been in the republic for so long, after all. Especially after you

discovered that thing—a ‘log,’ I think you called it? Even I can’t maintain my cool after hearing the phrase ‘two-timing’ in reference to Leon.”
Angie and Livia had come all this way to Alzer for fear that Leon was cheating.
However, the two had very different attitudes toward this philandering. Angie was angry about the situation, but she had forgiven Leon for the indiscretion.
“Honestly, the nerve of him. If he’s going to mess around, there’s a proper order to these things. What in the world is he thinking, leaving us at home to twiddle our thumbs while he goes off to play?”
As the daughter of a duke—ergo, part of the nobility—Angie knew infidelity was all too common. To get upset over it would only be unhealthy.
Livia, however, saw it differently. “I can’t believe he would cheat! He hasn’t even gotten intimate with us yet, but he’s already off with some other girl in a foreign country? In such a short span of time?”
Angie gave her a troubled smile. “Well, he is a man. If you worry over it too much, you’ll ruin yourself in the long run.”
“B-but still!”
The girls had grown up in entirely different worlds, and their thought processes understandably differed.
“Oh?” Cleare spoke up. “Looks like the republic’s security force made a run for it.”
Angie cocked her head to the side. “But what about their inspection?”
“Seems we’re free to go on through. How odd.”
Livia fell into thought for a moment but quickly shook her head, trying to rid herself of her dreary mood. “At least this means we can enter the country, which also means we can now confirm for ourselves whether Mr. Leon really cheated on us.”
The determination in Livia’s eyes made Cleare stutter. “Uh, a-are you two sure you don’t want to tell him you’re coming? I really think we should say *something*.”
Angie shook her head. “Now that we’re this close to the republic, I’m sure Luxion must have noticed us. Besides, if we give Leon any prior notice, he might get rid of the evidence of his misdeeds. In any case, if he had contacted us to begin with, we wouldn’t have made the trek all the way here.”
A potential affair wasn’t Angie’s only concern. True, she was worried that Leon might have developed genuine feelings for someone else, but more than that, she wanted to know what type of person this girl was. If she was a real piece of work, it would only spell trouble for the lot of them—and if she was a wicked temptress leading Leon around by the nose, Angie wouldn’t sit by and watch. Whether he liked it or not, she’d put an end to it.
The worst possible scenario would be if the woman had political power. Nothing could be more troublesome than if he’d entangled himself with an Alzerian noble. It would be one thing if they were low-ranking, but if they

were a person of any real consequence, Angie and Livia would really have trouble.
“Leon, you jerk… Are you really all right?”
Affairs were morally dubious, there was no doubt about that. On top of that, Leon was the Hero of Holfort, which meant that even if he wanted to mess around with other people, he needed to be careful.
Angie had one other big worry. I simply hope the other person isn’t Marie.
Marie had managed to ensnare the former crown prince, Julius, as well as four other former noble heirs. Worse, she was hanging around Leon. Angie couldn’t help but worry about what might transpire between them.
Don’t you dare betray me, Leon.

***

We arrived at the republic’s harbor. The ships scheduled to land that morning were late, and the Alzerians were abuzz. In particular, the militia was on edge. Three ships had come from the kingdom, but only one had captured the attention of curious onlookers. It looked like an exact replica of the *Einhorn* save for its white paint job. If they had been the same shade, even I would have struggled to tell them apart.
“I suppose the minor details might be a little different too. What do you think, Luxion?” When he didn’t immediately answer me, I glanced over at him. “Uh, Luxion?”
We had come to a stop beside the *Licorne*, and Luxion was vibrating in place as he looked at it. Was he, uh, angry? He really was particular when it came to craftsmanship.
“Now you’ve done it, Cleare,” Luxion muttered.
“Huh? What do you mean? Didn’t you build this thing?”
“No!” he snapped. “She used the *Einhorn*’s spare parts without my permission to build a second ship!”
Personally, given how beautiful it had turned out, I didn’t see any reason not to let it slide. “What’s the issue? If it’s got the same capabilities as the *Einhorn*, that just gives me peace of mind. We can have Angie and Livia use it.”
“No—she’s altered my design. I don’t know how its capabilities compare, but I cannot allow this. Please excuse me. I’m going to interrogate her.”
Luxion flew off, leaving me behind.
A ramp slowly extended from the ship. I waved my arms at the silhouettes who came moseying down.
“Hey, you two!” I called. It’s been so long since we last saw each other. If I run up to them, I am sure they’ll smile and welcome me with open—hm? That’s strange.
My fiancées were smiling, but there was something off about their expressions…

Crap, what did I do wrong?! A chill ran down my spine, and I shrank back. "Wh-what's with you two today?" I asked. "Your smiles are looking awfully terrifying."

Livia approached, pressing her face close to mine—too close. Our noses almost touched. "It's been a while, Mr. Leon." Her lips peeled back in a smile that quickly disappeared. "By the way, you aren't hiding anything from us, are you?"

My eyes flew wide open. Hiding something? Yes, in fact—so many things that I couldn't keep track. Which one was she asking about? "Uh, what do you mean?"

Talking about it all here could only spell trouble. I turned my gaze to Angie. She, too, was smiling. "I'm relieved to see you're doing so well. Too well, in fact. Now, Leon, I think it's time for you to tell us *everything*."

Luxion was supposed to be my savior at times like these, but sadly, he had disappeared inside the ship and had yet to return.

Get your butt out here, Luxion! If there was ever a time I needed someone to swoop in, that time would be now. Please! Hurry it up!

For all of my begging, my wish was not to be. Our thoughts weren't even on the same wavelength, much to my chagrin. It was little surprise, then, that my prayers didn't reach him.

Livia latched on to my arm. Physically, I could have shaken her off, but her emotional grip on me was ironclad. "Mr. Leon, first, I would like to see your residence here."

Angie threaded her arm through my unoccupied one, pressing her lips close to my ear as she whispered, "We already finished all of the other affairs we had planned for summer break, so we came to visit. Don't you dare think you can escape us."

What the hell did I do?!

Way too much had happened since I'd last seen them. I couldn't even begin to fathom what exactly had sparked their anger.

Could it be because I made a political mess of things here? Or because I worked Julius and the boys like dogs? Nah, can't be the latter. They wouldn't be upset about that. Maybe it was the cringeworthy letter I penned for Miss Mylene? Oh, yeah, I did also send a gift for Miss Clarice. Maybe that was a bad idea? Come to think of it, I also went out shopping with Miss Deirdre while she was visiting on diplomatic business. I even held a tea party for her, and we went out to a pretty expensive restaurant one night for dinner.

Let's see, what else… Oh yeah! Maybe it's because I'm paying for Marie's daily expenses? That would probably do it. Or would it? If they knew the circumstances, I'm sure they would sympathize—no, okay. They wouldn't.

Marie had stolen Angie's former fiancé. It was a stretch to think either Angie or Livia would feel any compassion for her after that.

Dammit! They could be upset about any one of those things. I'm totally lost!

"Mr. Leon, please be completely honest with us."

“And you’d better steel yourself. Depending on how you answer, I may have to roll up my sleeves.”
They began dragging me away from the harbor.
Just what did I do to upset you girls?!

***

Things were no less hectic at Marie’s house.
It was summer break at last, which meant Marie had to look after her five boys from morning until night.
“Hey! I had some soup set aside for lunch. Who ate it all?!”
Since she had to prepare all three meals for everyone now, she’d woken up early to make an enormous pot of soup. It had been her hope that it might last them until dinner—okay, at least lunch. Leon was gone for the morning, but she still had five growing boys to feed. Besides the soup, the bread and ham was also conspicuously missing. Whoever had eaten it had left their silverware and plates out in the open.
I can’t…I can’t believe them! Surely they know how I’ve been breaking my back this morning cleaning the whole house!
Leon had informed her that Angie and Livia would be coming, so she’d hastily set to work tidying the place. Kyle—a half-elf boy who acted as Marie’s servant—and Carla had joined her desperate attempts to make the mansion presentable. Once noon finally rolled around, she decided to check things in the kitchen, which had brought her to the magical disappearing soup.
Jilk—who had apparently been preparing tea, if the pot in his hand was any indication—rushed in to see what all the fuss was about. “What’s wrong, Miss Marie?”
She turned to him and thrust a trembling finger toward the kitchen. “That soup was supposed to be our lunch. Who ate it?”
Lunch was less than an hour away. It would be next to impossible to prepare a meal in time now, especially given how many mouths she had to feed. They didn’t even have enough ingredients in the house at present. She would need to go grocery shopping first. Worst-case scenario, she had planned to feed the boys and take Kyle and Carla out to eat with her. But she wasn’t about to let them off the hook for sneaking in an unplanned meal.
“Oh, this?” Jilk asked bashfully. “Well, you see, Greg mentioned feeling a bit peckish…”
“I see. So Greg is the culprit.”
“No. We were also hungry, so the five of us tried looking around to see what we might scrounge up,” Jilk answered completely matter-of-factly, entirely oblivious to her ire. “We discovered some soup in a pot, but that seemed a bit lackluster, so we pulled out some bread and ham and had ourselves a meal. It’s fun to make something on our own occasionally.”

Marie’s eyes went round. Her tiny body swelled with pent-up rage as she debated how best to take it out on them. *You didn’t* make *anything! You just took what was already there! And now what are you idiots going to do for lunch?!*

Marie suppressed the urge to scream, electing instead to gather the boys so she could lecture them.

“Jilk, call everyone here. I made a mistake. Since we’re all living here together, I should have taught you the basics of communal life sooner.”

Marie was embarrassed to admit it, but she’d thought these things were common sense that everyone else would simply intuit. In retrospect, she should have spelled it out for them. Their days abroad had been so busy that she had let these issues go without confronting them properly. Alas, her plans were not to be.

“Pardon? They all went out.”

Apparently Jilk was the only one still at home.

“What do you mean ‘they all went out’?!” Marie was at her wits’ end. She, Kyle, and Carla had labored all morning to tidy the place, and in the meantime, the boys had wandered out to have fun on the town?

“Miss Marie, please calm down,” Jilk cooed gently. “It’s almost lunch. Aren’t you starting to feel a bit hungry? I have the perfect snacks for the occasion, and I was just about to pour some tea as well. Why don’t you relax with me before lunch?”

She was still fuming, but she also couldn’t deny her growling stomach. For the moment, Marie decided to calm down and accept his offer.

“Fine. Although, the bigger question I have is where you got these snacks. We finished off everything my broth—I mean, Leon—gave us yesterday.”

Leon’s hobby was tea—tea parties, tea leaves, tea pots and cups—all of that. He often purchased snacks to go along with it. Since Marie shared in the spoils, she could hardly complain, but it did annoy her to see him waste his money on expensive sweets. However, Leon was the one financially supporting them, so it wasn’t her business to judge his spending habits.

The two left the kitchen and entered the dining hall, where Jilk already had the tea prepared. Marie’s jaw dropped when she looked at the table.

“What is all of this?!”

A tea set and snacks were nothing strange, but there was far too much of the latter. Some were in fancy metal cases stacked like towers, and all of them looked pricey.

“Actually, I returned home with them only moments ago,” Jilk bragged, blind to Marie’s horror. “The place I went to visit had the perfect tea set, so I picked it up and decided to purchase some leaves and snacks to go along with it.”

Not only had he spent money on sweets, but he purchased a tea set and tea leaves as well? Marie’s entire body trembled. “You *bought* these?! Where did you get the money?”

Although she did give the boys a small allowance, that wouldn't have been enough to cover this kind of expense.
Jilk furrowed his brows. "Hm? Oh. While we were searching for something to eat, we happened to find some money. We split it between us before going out. It's standard for a party to divide treasure, after all."
Had Marie been more removed from the situation, she might have noted how the boys' behavior resembled that of their adventuring forebears. It was one thing to treat searching for food like a treasure hunt, but it wasn't amusing at all for him to liken the money they found to treasure from a dungeon. The only substantial cash one might have found lying around the mansion was Marie's savings—in other words, the money Leon had allotted her for their daily expenses.
Marie flew out of the dining hall, making a mad dash for the room where she stored her money. She had let her guard down since she knew everyone in the house, and rather than put her cash in a safe, she had simply tucked it away in a false-bottom drawer. She opened it now to find it empty.
On top of the desk was her accounting ledger, which she had pored over as she debated how best to budget their expenses. It had all been for naught.
"Noooooooooooo!"
Not even a single coin remained.
Marie sank to the ground, her knees thudding against the floor. The noise caught Noelle's attention as she passed by the room, cradling the Sacred Tree Sapling in its transparent case in her arms.
"Rie? What's wrong?" she asked, rushing over.
Marie started panicking for a very different reason. Gah! Why is Noelle here? I heard she was going back home today!
Angie and Livia would be coming later, which was why Marie didn't want Noelle around. Leon still hadn't realized that Noelle had feelings for him.
Noelle tucked the case with the sapling under her arm and helped peel Marie off the floor. "What happened? You were screaming like it was the end of the world."
"O-oh, that. It's nothing. Just, you know…a pretty big problem cropped up."
"That doesn't sound like nothing!"
"D-don't worry. I'll take care of it! Anyway, forget about that. Why are you still here? Weren't you going back home today?"
Leon would be returning any moment now. She needed to get Noelle out of the house—and fast. If things had been any different, Marie would have been forthright with Noelle and convinced her to give up on Leon. …But Noelle was such a good person, and every time Marie saw the way she looked at Leon, she couldn't find the words. She didn't want to break the girl's heart.
That wasn't Marie's only reason for holding her tongue, admittedly. The other reason was that as the protagonist of the second game, Noelle had a habit of drawing in the wrong men.
Alas, this was bad timing.

Why do I have to jump through hoops for my thickheaded brother?! That moron. He'll rant about how much he hates ditzy protagonists, but he's no more intuitive than they are!

Leon was completely oblivious to Noelle's feelings. As his sister—or technically, sister in their previous world—Marie was ashamed.

Noelle blushed. "Oh, um, I forgot to leave this little one where it could get some sun." She held up the sapling. Her face softened, her eyes warm as she gazed at it.

To Marie, it almost looked as though the protagonist had fallen in love with the game's key item. "Uh, okay. Well, you'd best hurry—ack?!"

Right as Marie was about to find some excuse to shoo Noelle out of the door, the sapling began faintly glowing. The back of Noelle's right hand shone bright, a seal appearing on her skin.

Marie's memories of the second game had all but faded, but she recognized the Priestess's Crest.

Noelle gawked at it for a moment, but her face soon relaxed, her cheeks flushed.

Marie had transcended panic and was now lost in confusion. Wait. Hold on just a minute! Why would that trigger now? What does it mean for her to suddenly receive the Priestess's Crest out of nowhere? And don't tell me… that means her partner must be…

Noelle gazed at the back of her hand and mumbled. "Now if a crest appears on Leon too, that will mean our feelings are mutual, won't it?"

Oh, no. Oh, craaaap! No one's told her that Leon already has the Guardian's Crest!

All of the problems Marie had pushed to the side were beginning to move on their own and in the worst direction imaginable. She wanted to break down and cry.

As if things weren't bad enough—

"We're home! Huh? Where is everyone?" A carefree voice called from the front entrance. Leon's voice, to be precise.

Noelle's brows shot up. She reached for Marie and dragged her out of the room. "Rie," she said, "for the moment, I think it's best you rest."

"Yeah. Yeah… I'm kinda at my limit."

Leon had come back at the worst possible time. Marie couldn't take any more. *How is this going to play out? Do I even want to know?*

***

After escorting Marie to her room, Noelle turned to find Leon, sapling still in hand. If the same crest happened to appear on him, she knew that would mean their feelings were as good as requited.

The Lespinasse family, once part of the Seven Great Houses, had produced many Priestesses, and they passed a certain legend down from one

generation to the next. According to that tale, the Priestess would fall in love with a young man who possessed the power befitting a Guardian.
As a child, Noelle hadn't given it much credence. Political marriages were the norm in her world. She didn't think a romantic story could possibly be true. At the same time, she found herself hoping it was. Now, she was on the verge of seeing that wish become reality.
Noelle started down the stairs, squeezing the transparent case to her chest. "Please, little sapling, make my wish come true."
When he'd first arrived, Leon had been merely a mysterious exchange student from Holfort Kingdom, but he had quickly become a dependable ally. His courage in picking a fight with the Six Great Houses had been impressive enough, but it wasn't all bravado; Leon had the power to actually face them.
True, Leon had his issues, but Noelle didn't like him any less for it. When she needed help, he was there. He had a bit of a crude tongue, but he was so open-minded.
Despite being born into the aristocracy, Noelle had been raised as a commoner. Her values tended to veer more toward the latter class as a result, but Leon had no trouble getting along with her because of it. In fact, she felt most at ease when she was with him, and if she could, she wanted to stay by his side forever.
Noelle loved Leon.
Unfortunately, as she made her way down the stairs, she heard a voice at the front door—a woman's voice.
"Seriously? I was shocked when I heard you were living with Marie, but I never dreamed something like that had happened. You should have told us what was going on sooner."
The woman in question wore a red dress and stood extremely close to Leon. The way she looked at Leon hit Noelle with a realization.
It can't be…
Despite the woman's headstrong air, her eyes were utterly tender as she gazed at him.
And on the other side of Leon was another girl, one who gave off the complete opposite impression of her partner. Although she seemed innocent and harmless on the surface, her eyes burned with jealousy. She was also clinging tightly to Leon's arm.
"Angie is right. Honestly, do you have any idea how much you worried us?"
For as angry as she was, the girl still needled Leon for attention—and he had no problem obliging her.
"My bad. Things were really hectic here, and it only started cooling off pretty recently. But yeah, I should have let you guys know sooner."
There was a gentleness in Leon's eyes as he looked between the two girls—a gentleness that Noelle had never received.

When Leon noticed her standing there, he spoke to her the same way he always did. “Oh? I thought you were going back home today, Noelle. Oops, I forgot to introduce you. These are my fiancées, Angie and Livia.”
Noelle’s chest panged. She now knew that Leon had never even treated her like a woman—only a friend.
She had never heard anything about him already being engaged.
What? So I was the only one feeling butterflies?
Noelle plastered a rehearsed smile on her face. “Nice to meet you!” she said cheerfully. “My name’s Noelle, and I’m staying here for the moment. Although more importantly, Leon, if you have such adorable fiancées, you shouldn’t be hanging around someone like me. It’ll give people the wrong idea.”
Noelle did her best to make her relationship with Leon clear, lest the other girls misconstrue it.
Angie smiled. “I heard. You’ve been through a lot.” Her sympathy meant she must have heard about Loic.
Livia, on the other hand, seemed to notice something amiss, though she didn’t let it slip. “Um, I’m Olivia. Thank you for looking after him for us.”
“Oh, no, you needn’t thank me. He was the one looking after me.” Noelle kept grinning the whole time, but she really just wanted to disappear. She shuffled up to Leon and handed the case to him.
“What’s wrong?” Leon knitted his brows.
As much as his obliviousness irked Noelle, she was even angrier at herself. “S-sorry, but I have to go home now.”
Noelle held back the tears until she escaped out of the door. She ran the rest of the way home, sobbing.
It had been a long time since she’d returned. Surprisingly, Lelia was there, and she even tried to strike up a conversation. But Noelle ignored her, retreating to her room, where she buried her face in a pillow.

Chapter 2:
Temporary Return

“WHAT? I’m being called back?”
After Noelle sped out of the house, Angie, Livia, and I settled down to enjoy some tea together.
I made the right choice pulling out my stash of tea leaves for this occasion.
It felt like it had been forever since I last saw Angie sip from a cup I’d prepared, even though just a couple of months earlier, we had regularly enjoyed moments like this.
“His Majesty requested it as well. If you’re on summer break right now, there should be no problem, right?”
There was no real issue, since I had no plans lined up. The only thing weighing on my mind was Noelle, but I doubted either of my fiancées would understand. I could only imagine the disbelief and disgust on their faces if I said, “Actually, this world is an otome game, and Noelle is the protagonist of the second installment in the series!” It gave me the shivers just thinking about anyone being stupid enough to blurt that out.
“I just don’t know about all of us returning together,” I said.
Angie shook her head. “Marie, His Highness, and the others will remain here. The only person returning with us is you, Leon.”
“What?” I’d been sure she meant the whole group was being called back, but apparently it was only me. Roland, that bastard. Who does he think he is, summoning me like this? …Okay, yeah, I get that he’s the king—and I’d totally be cool with it if he wasn’t such a rat.
Livia took one bite from her snack before setting it back down on her plate. It actually came from a stash of sweets Marie had in the dining hall, which she had been kind enough to bring over. Sadly, Livia didn’t seem too fond of the taste.
Pretty sure Marie said Jilk bought these.
Livia took a sip of the tea I’d prepared, cleansing her palate. “Actually, the queen agreed with His Majesty. If there’s political maneuvering going on here in the republic, she wants to talk about what we should do moving forward.”
“Miss Mylene too?! Uh, I mean… Her Majesty as well?”
Their eyes narrowed.
Holfort’s Queen Mylene Rapha Holfort was Julius’s mother, but despite her age, she still looked plenty young and beautiful. If we’d still been in Japan, I might have tried my luck with her.
Hold up. She’s married. I can’t do that. Why did she have to be taken? She was totally my type!
“Uh, um,” I said, trying to find the words. “Well, I guess I better get back to Holfort then.”

Livia’s cheeks puffed as she pouted. “You sure seem happy about being able to see Her Majesty again.”
I can’t help it! She’s cute! Even now I found it hard to believe such an amazing woman was married to garbage like Roland. *Political marriages sure are rough.*
Angie cleared her throat. “Sorry to be so abrupt, but yes, you’ll be coming straight back with us to Holfort. You’re the only one who can act in the event that something does transpire here in the republic, so you need to be involved in the conversation.”
I didn’t want to dirty my hands with the republic’s politics, but Holfort Kingdom didn’t share my sentiments. One of the Six Great Houses—the Feivels—had lost power. That was actually my fault, since I had orchestrated their downfall, but any resultant political upheaval might impact the kingdom. They couldn’t afford to get directly involved without diplomatic repercussions, but perhaps they thought I could more easily manipulate things while I was here studying abroad.
They give me way too much credit.
Politically speaking, I was like a baby who had barely learned to crawl.
Angie glanced around. “That aside… So this is where you’ve been living with His Highness and the others, hm? I was worried that something might have happened between you and Marie.”
There is no way in hell that’s ever happening. I shook my head. “You have nothing to worry about. There’s nothing between Marie and me now, and there never will be.”
Livia eyed me suspiciously. “Can we really take you at your word? You *have* been known to lie sometimes.”
“Aw, c’mon. My one redeeming quality is my honesty.”
Angie chuckled. “It’s been a while since we last drank tea to the tune of your dubious excuses. Now, I hate to hurry you, but if you have no other plans, let’s leave tomorrow. Do you have anything you need to take care of before we’re off?”
Not really. Although, I would have liked time to buy some more gifts for everyone back home.
“Oh, actually, why don’t you two go sightseeing for a bit while you’re here? Since we’ll be going back to the kingdom, I’d like to stop by my parents’ place on the way, and I’ll need some souvenirs to bring them.”
The girls traded looks before nodding.
“All right. I trust you’ll escort us while we’re here.”
“We are excited to spend time with you, Mr. Leon.”
My heart warmed as they both smiled at me.
Admittedly, the thought of Marie having to take care of matters here in the republic while I was gone made me seriously anxious.

***

That night, Leon took Angie and Livia out on the town. Supposedly they would be dining at a restaurant while they were at it. Marie suspected Angie and Livia didn't want to eat any meal she'd prepared. She understood that, but it troubled her when they didn't return.
"Why isn't he back?!" she wailed.
"Because Livia and Angie said they don't want to stay here," said Cleare.
"*They* can stay wherever. Why doesn't my brother at least come back?! I wanted to talk to him about my finances!"
Marie's five idiots had made off with their entire budget. She had no idea how much would be left once they were through squandering it. Worst-case scenario, they would spend the rest of summer break penniless.
"I don't know what plants are edible in this country!"
She knew the plants back home well enough to be able to forage on her own at least, but it was a different story in this foreign land. Marie had no idea if the grasses near their mansion were safe to eat.
"Rie, do you really mean to munch on whatever weeds are growing in the garden?" asked Cleare. "Well, whatever, you can't hold it against the girls. Did you actually expect them to stay here? In the same place where you and His Highness are living?"
Julius was one of the many men Marie had enticed, thereby destroying his previous engagement to Angie. Given their past, it only stood to reason that Angie wouldn't want to be around them.
"But they could at least stay at *his* residence," Marie protested.
"Master said that was a no go on account of not having cleaned it yet, so they're crashing in the *Licorne* for now. In the morning, he'll hop on the *Einhorn* and be on his way back to the kingdom."
Marie fell into despair. Some fine study abroad experience this was turning out to be. At this rate, she wasn't even going to be able to enjoy summer break!
"Now what am I supposed to do?!"
Having sufficiently enjoyed Marie's suffering, Cleare finally said, "Ding-dong. Master already knows your situation."
"He does?!"
"Yes, and he said that since he'll be away from the republic for a bit, he expects you to deal with anything that happens in the meantime."
"What? That's it? Ugh, you big idiot of a brother!"
Alas, her hopes were dashed. Leon hadn't prepared any backup financial aid.
Cleare dropped something, and a heavy thump echoed.
Marie's spine immediately straightened. "Wh-what is this?"
She opened the bag to discover that it was, wonder of wonders, filled with cash.
"Master said you'd probably need this for your expenses and the like."
Marie threw her arms around the bag, nuzzling her cheek against it. "He's the best brother ever!"

“Greedy as ever, I see,” Cleare said, exasperated. “Not that I dislike you for it. After all, it goes to show how pure the old human blood is in you! Far from disliking you, I adore you, Rie!”
The old humans had created both Luxion and Cleare as weapons, but their feelings were beyond Marie’s comprehension. She let the talk of blood and genetics go in one ear and out the other. The most important thing to her was finances, which was why she clung so desperately to the bag.
“Let my brother know he can leave everything to me,” said Marie. “The Six Great Houses are terrified of him after what he did, so I’m sure they won’t try anything.”
“Don’t forget: Danger comes when you least expect it. Anyway, I’ll be staying with you this time, so if anything *does* happen, I’ll be sure to pitch in.”
“What?” Marie blinked. “You’re staying?”
“Master was too worried to leave you on your own. I should warn you that I was originally an AI working in a research facility though, so don’t expect my capabilities to match Luxion’s.” Under her breath, Cleare muttered, “I really hope he returns as quickly as possible.”
However, Marie optimistically assumed that as long as Cleare was here, there would be no issues. She was convinced that the Six Great Houses were too terrified to act anyway, and there was a more pressing concern.
“I’m actually most worried about Noelle,” she said.
“That’s protag number two, right? Something happen with her?”
“Yeah, my brother broke her heart. I never dreamed she would fall for him.”

***

The next day, Lelia was flabbergasted when Noelle finally came out of her room with swollen eyes and a bad case of bedhead. Her hair always had a mind of its own, but this was particularly awful.
Noelle shyly stroked a hand over the tangles, forcing a smile. “It’s been so long that even my bed felt different. But since the sun is out today, I was thinking about doing some house cleaning.”
“Something happened, didn’t it?” Lelia asked.
“Nothing at all.”
They were sisters—twins, actually. Lelia could see right through that lie. In fact, she would’ve known something was wrong even if they weren’t related.
“If you don’t want to talk about it, I won’t force you, but I think you’ll feel better if you do.” Lelia handed her sister a cup of coffee. She froze for a split second when she noticed Noelle hiding the back of her right hand.
It was easy to guess why.
I can’t believe it. Did the Priestess’s Crest appear? But then…does that mean Leon is her partner?
The order in which the crests had appeared was strange, but they *had* appeared. In game terms, they had already cleared one of the hurdles. But

Noelle's behavior was worrying. Confused as she was, Lelia kept it from showing on her face.
Noelle covered her face with her left hand. "Lelia, you know our family's legend, right? The one about the Priestess and the Guardian."
Lelia sipped her coffee as she contemplated. That's right, there was a story, wasn't there?
Said legend played a pivotal role in the romantic plot of the second game. Ordinarily, the Priestess picked a man who would then become the Guardian. The Sacred Tree doled out many crests, but the most important—and most powerful—was given to the person the Priestess selected, hence the reason for the legend, narratively speaking.
"It's said the person most suited to becoming the Guardian is someone who feels deeply for the priestess and whose affection she also returns in kind. Or something like that, right? That's how Mom picked Dad, anyway."
That's right. Even though Albergue Rault was her intended, our mother picked a man outside of the Six Great Houses.
Lelia and Noelle's father had been a commoner with no crest. Their mother had betrayed her engagement with Albergue to choose him. This had enraged Albergue, and in revenge, he had annihilated House Lespinasse. Or at least, that was how it was explained in the game.
Lelia could still remember how it had happened.
And thus, the protagonist meets her love interests at the academy, feelings blossom between them, and she's able to pick the man she truly cares about to be the Guardian. Although we've kinda gone off track, since Leon's already been chosen.
It was no wonder Lelia was so confused. It had never crossed her mind that Noelle might pick Leon—at least not until now.
"The truth is…I love Leon. But my feelings seem to be one-sided. I couldn't bear to keep living there with them, so I came back," Noelle admitted as she sobbed. Her gaze was glued to the back of her right hand. Her heart had taken an enormous blow. She clearly still hadn't acknowledged that she'd received her crest.
Lelia couldn't afford the same denial. I can't decide whether this is a good thing or a bad thing.
She was happy that they finally had a Priestess and a Guardian, but Noelle was completely in the dumps. That made it hard to predict how the story would develop from here.
"Did you tell him how you feel?" asked Lelia. "He doesn't seem like he'd be that popular with the girls. I bet if you told him, he'd jump for joy."
Leon didn't share the love interests' good fortune in the looks department. Lelia also hadn't heard of any romantic entanglements between him and any other girls, so she was pretty sure he was available.
Noelle shook her head. "He's already engaged. And to two women, at that."
"Two?!" Lelia spluttered. It was shocking enough to hear he had one fiancée. "O-oh. Well, I guess he *is* part of the nobility. Maybe that's not all

that odd for Holfortians.” All the while, she was beginning to second guess what she’d thought was common practice—namely, having only one partner.
Wait a sec. I’m pretty sure Holfort Kingdom’s supposed to be a matriarchy, right? Is reality somehow different from the game? I’d better check with Marie and Leon just to be sure.
“W-well, I understand the circumstances now at least. So what do you plan to do? It’s not good to dwell on things. Maybe you should look for someone else instead?” Inwardly, Lelia racked her brain over which love interest she might still feasibly pair her sister with.
Noelle shook her head. “Not right now. I don’t even want to think about romance.”
Sounds like this is pretty serious.
Lelia concluded that she would need to consult with Marie and Leon, but she couldn’t leave her sister alone in her current state. She would stick by Noelle’s side for the rest of the day.

***

Before making our way to Holfort’s capital, we dropped by my parents’ house. When my father came out to welcome me, he seized me by the shoulders and shook me.
“What in the world were you doing there in Alzer?! We were right to get you engaged before you left. Or maybe that was a mistake, actually. At any rate, why are you cheating on those girls?!”
If this was any indication, my family already knew about my suspected adultery.
You guys really have no faith in me. “I didn’t cheat. It was all a misunderstanding, okay?”
“You’re…not pulling my leg, right?”
Jenna—who had returned home since the academy was on break—came waltzing up as the two of us were speaking. “Hey, Leon, where’s my present?”
Finley, my younger sister, was right on her heels. She was petite, with short, curly hair and a hell of a glare. Presumably, she had also heard talk of my alleged two-timing.
“You are absolute garbage,” she said.
Why am I getting dragged through the mud? I told you guys it was a misunderstanding. I glared at Jenna.
“Wh-what? Don’t tell me your lechery would go so far!”
Even as a joke, that wasn’t funny. I was definitely not into incest. The only reason I eyed her at all was because I kept thinking about the girl back in the republic who had begged me to call her “Big Sis.” Her name was Louise, and she was as kind as she was dependable.
I averted my eyes from Jenna and mumbled, “I want an exchange.”

Her face grew red with rage. “What’s your problem?!” she snapped. “How dare you suddenly stare at me and speak of wishing to *exchange* me! You really have no manners. The republic must be a truly bizarre place if any of the women there are willing to have an affair with you.”
I snorted. “Oh, yeah? Well, what about you, dear sister? Find yourself a partner at the academy yet?”
Jenna trembled in place before stomping off, as if to escape my question. Finley followed close behind her, glancing back only once to stick her tongue out at me.
Knowing my sister, I was pretty sure she hadn’t found anyone. Seemed like I was right.
I grinned triumphantly as I watched her go. “I win this round.”
“Don’t antagonize her,” said my father with an exasperated sigh. “Jenna really does seem to be trying her best. The problem is the boys at the academy are on the defensive right now, warding off potential suitors. So there’s no one for her to pair off with.”
“What do you mean by ‘on the defensive’?”
“They’re all claiming that they’d rather marry someone who hasn’t been exposed to the academy’s previously poisonous ideology. Well, at any rate, I’ll marry her into one of our knight families, so she won’t be totally out of luck.”
In other words, he would pick a boy from one of the houses serving our family. Knights had their own lands—fiefs. Honestly, I balked at the idea.
“You’re going to force her on one of them? I pity the guy with that little luck.”
“D-don’t phrase it like that. I do plan to educate her properly beforehand.”
Yeah, “plan to” being the key words here. Considering Jenna’s attitude, he was fighting an uphill battle.
The one positive out of all of this was that the marriage situation seemed to be changing in the kingdom. I envied my underclassmen for that.
Although, I admit, I have two wonderful partners, so there’s nothing for me to begrudge.
“More importantly, His Majesty summoned you to the capital, didn’t he?” asked Father. “What did you do this time?”
“I wish you wouldn’t say it like I’m always getting myself into trouble. All I did was give some Alzerian noble’s son a good pounding. That’s all.”
“You know, sometimes I’m overcome with guilt and want to tell the king and queen how sorry I am for all the trouble you cause them.”
Well, that’s uncalled for. They’re the ones giving me trouble, I’ll have you know.

***

When I made my way to the capital, Roland was waiting to see me. Our meeting was more casual than not, since we didn’t use an audience

chamber. He had some officials, as well as some knights to guard him. Miss Mylene was present too, but Roland seemed eager to do all of the talking. If his pale skin and disheveled hair were any indication, he was pretty fatigued. Apparently, they had been pretty busy here in the wake of the incident with the republic, and he made his indignation about that no secret.
“You look well, brat. Thanks to *someone*, I haven’t even had the time to sleep lately.”
“Oh, well *I* am doing amazing. Sleeping like a baby every night,” I said, smiling blithely.
Roland ground his teeth in frustration.
Yes! Good, good—just like that. I’ll be sleeping extra good tonight.
“We have been drowning in work because of you,” Roland spat. “You sure do love trouble.”
“The Alzerians picked the fight. I thought it would be rude to deny them.”
“What are you, some kind of barbarian? Who starts a war over a petty argument? You disappoint me.”
“Oh, thank you, Your Majesty! I so desperately wanted to see that exact expression on your face. That’s the whole reason I put so much effort in!”
Roland’s disappointment meant nothing to me. In fact, he’d never expected anything from me to begin with. That said, I had done this knowing it would vex him, so this reaction didn’t surprise me.
“I would love to send you to the gallows right this second.”
“My queen! Can you believe our king would say such a thing?!”
Panicked, Roland snarled under his breath, “You cowardly fiend.”
Mylene was clearly exasperated by the whole situation. “We cannot send the man who saved our Julius to the gallows. In fact, this is an excellent opportunity for us. We should prepare a reward for Leon—no, sorry, *Lord* Leon.”
What, I’m getting a reward?
Up until this point, I had climbed the social ladder at a ridiculous pace, but now I was an earl—and with a lower third court ranking at that. That was as high as I could go. Whatever this reward, it wouldn’t be further promotions at least, which was all the more reason to happily receive it for once.
Although the real question is: How did I ever end up at this rank to begin with? Even I found it odd.
Roland averted his eyes. He was pouting like a child, but since *I* was an adult, I let it slide.
“Thanks to you, we have had a chance to get detailed information on the republic’s inner workings,” Mylene continued. “I had heard they worshiped this Sacred Tree, but it seems it benefited them greatly in other ways as well.”
If that’s all you knew, weren’t we a little inexcusably ignorant before?
Suspicious as I found it, maybe that was only because I was accustomed to how things worked in my previous world. Correspondence in this world

traveled at a snail's pace. There was also the issue of credibility. There were so many rumors that it was hard to distinguish truth from fiction, so what reports did come in couldn't be taken for granted. Apparently, since Miss Mylene trusted me personally, she put faith in the information I delivered.
Nothing could please me more.
"Now that the Feivels have lost power, I wonder how Rachel will react," she said thoughtfully.
"Are you referring to the Holy Kingdom of Rachel?" I asked.
One of Holfort's neighbors, the Holy Kingdom was a hostile nation involved in no small number of wars. They also had an embassy in the republic. Miss Mylene's motherland was a small country on the other side of Rachel called the United Kingdom of Lepart. It was a collection of various states that had united to form a kingdom under three large families, of which Miss Mylene's acted as the leaders. They had their own special circumstances and a convoluted system of government. But leaving that mess aside, Lepart had basically been founded because Rachel kept threatening to invade and no smaller country on its own had stood any chance of fending them off.
"Rachel has ties to the Feivels," Miss Mylene explained, seeing the surprised on my face at the turn the conversation had taken. "Now that the Feivels have lost power, it's possible they may try to rely on those connections. Or it could be that Rachel will try to approach one of the other houses instead."
Ah, that's what she means. Makes total sense. I frowned. "Wait. In that case, which family have we cozied up to?" No one had bothered to tell me.
Roland scowled. "No one in particular. At least not anymore. They're gone now."
"Do you mean the Lespinasses?"
Once, Alzer was ruled not by the Six Great Houses but the *Seven* Great Houses. Lelia and Noelle's family, House Lespinasse, had traditionally served as chairmen of the assembly. However, about ten years ago, they had been wiped out by the Raults. That meant Miss Louise and Mr. Albergue had been involved. Neither of them had ever been unkind toward me, but it did leave a lump in my throat.
"We never made an alliance with any house thereafter, and the import of their magic stones ceased. Come to think of it, it's been about a decade since then," said Roland.
Miss Mylene's brows drew together in contemplation. "Yes, it's been over ten years since House Lespinasse fell. We need to find a new ally."
Alzer made its fortune by exporting magic stones. For that very reason, Holfort wanted a solid (and substantial) pipeline through which they could receive their share. I understood their motivations. I tried to imagine who they might align themselves with, but I honestly had no idea. Politics were beyond me.
"Well, the Feivels are out of the question," I said. That was the only thing I did know with any certainty. "You'll have to pick one of the other five."

Apparently (much to my relief), Miss Mylene didn't intend to leave the matter entirely to me.

"We'll be sending a diplomat regularly, so all you'll have to do is support them while they're in the republic. I hear the heirs of the Six Great Houses are attending the academy, so if you could share any information on them, we would be most appreciative. We'll also arrange matters so that you will be cleared to move freely while you're in the republic. If anything untoward does occur, we leave it to you to handle it however you see fit."

We weren't in a public venue, but Miss Mylene was still being more formal than usual. She was completely in work mode. Bit disappointing, to tell you the truth. But if she asked this of me, I had no choice but to oblige. After all, I was both an earl and a knight of Holfort. Disobedience wasn't an option.

"As you wish," I said.

"Now hold on!" Roland interjected. "Why did you look utterly disgusted when I made a request, but when Mylene does, you're all smiles?!"

The answer should be obvious enough. I snorted. "Perhaps it has to do with how you regularly conduct yourself? You should really learn to take your work more seriously, Your Majesty."

The other officials and knights standing on guard nodded firmly in agreement. In fact, some of them shot me expectant looks, hoping I would lecture the king more. Jeez, how much did this guy slack off, anyway?

Chapter 3:
Idiot Brigade, Begone

WHILE LEON was on his temporary return to the kingdom, Marie remained at her mansion in the Alzer Republic, where she was, at present, trembling with rage.

"Aw, you poor thing," Cleare cooed, enjoying the show from the sidelines. "You sure don't learn your lesson, do you?" She cackled.

Marie's shoulders rose and fell with every breath, her eyes bloodshot. Kyle and Carla stood on either side of her, doing their best to pacify her.

"M-Mistress, it's all right! We hid half the money this time, so they weren't able to find *that*!" Kyle tried to soothe her, but his words had no effect.

Marie's eyes were glued to the top of her desk. Someone had used her accounting ledger as a memo pad, writing a message that read:

We have reflected on our prior mistakes and decided this time to prepare a gift for you instead, in hopes that we might lift your spirits. To supplement our budget, we have borrowed a bit from the funds you use for our daily needs. We hope you'll eagerly anticipate our gift!

It was all nonsense as far as Marie was concerned. Veins protruded from her forehead. She clenched her hands so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

Carla was on the verge of tears. "I promise it will be fine, Lady Marie! We made sure to purchase all of our groceries before they could make off with the money!"

In other words, they could make do with the provisions they had, at least until Leon returned.

That, however, was not enough for Marie.

"I told them," she hissed.

Kyle and Carla averted their eyes.

The last time this had happened—when the five morons swiped their funds, split it between themselves, and proceeded to blow it all—Marie had, of course, torn them a new one when they got back. She hadn't minced words; she specifically told them that they were not to use money she'd budgeted for their living expenses. Alas, they hadn't comprehended a word.

Marie wasn't stupid either. She'd stowed half the additional finances her brother had provided in a secret location. The other half, naturally, had also been tucked away somewhere those idiots wouldn't just stumble across it.

For whatever reason, her harem of fools had gotten it into their heads that Marie was upset with them for leaving her behind while they went out and had fun.

"I explained it very clearly. 'This money is specifically for our daily necessities here in Alzer, so you mustn't use it without asking.' You two

remember me saying that, don't you?!" Marie whipped around to face Carla and Kyle. They stiffened, standing a little straighter.
"You definitely did say that!"
"Y-yes, I remember you did too!"
They trembled before the fury in Marie's face.
Cleare, uninvolved and uninvested in any of this, merely enjoyed the spectacle. She was interested to see how Marie handled the matter.
Whether their timing was fortuitous or otherwise, Julius and his comrades suddenly returned. Excited voices echoed from the entrance to the mansion.
"Marie will most certainly be delighted by this," said Julius.
"I do happen to think we could have done something better for her though," said Jilk.
Marie donned a poker face as she marched out of the room. Kyle and Carla traded glances and shook their heads before they silently followed her.
When Marie arrived in the foyer, Brad waved at her.
"Oh, you're all here together. Look, this is what we got for you, Marie!"
The five boys had brought a veritable mountain of bouquets. The fragrance filled the foyer. By all rights, it should have been a pleasant smell, but the sheer number of flowers was so overwhelming that their scent had the opposite effect. Worse, had the boys brought a single bouquet, Marie might have been a bit irked, but she would have blushed and forgiven the boys soon enough. But this? This was plain overkill.
Chris oversaw the placement of the bouquets, directing the vendors who were delivering them. "Put that one there. And that one in the case would look nice here, I think."
The flowers came in a wide variety, and in such quantities that they could have opened their own shop.
Greg brushed a finger under the base of his nose. "When you think about a present for a girl, flowers are the first thing that comes to mind. We tried decidin' what kind of flower would suit you best, and that's how we wound up with dozens of all kinds."
None of this brought a smile to Marie's face. Her expression remained utterly devoid of emotion.
Carla covered her face with her hands. "Why would you all make off with our savings?!"
The boys regarded her with confusion.
Julius frowned. "We only borrowed a little. Besides, I'm sure it will be replenished soon enough, no?"
Leon had admittedly just given Marie another hefty sum to cover their expenses. Furthermore, while one might assume Julius and his friends were eccentric when it came to money, that wasn't quite true. Julius was royalty, and the others were former heirs to prestigious houses. Their sense of monetary value had been on a different level from the very beginning. While Marie thought their finances were a fortune, Julius and his friends thought

the sum little more than pocket change. This difference could not be solved easily or with any immediacy.
“I told you, didn’t I?” Jilk grumbled. “These bouquets are cheap. I believe she would be more pleased if we’d gone with the vase I selected.”
Julius shook his head. “You say that, but I still think it was gaudy.”
As the vendors finished delivering the last of the bouquets, the five boys began to contemplate, wondering what they had done that was so wrong.
Marie’s lips slowly curled into a smile.
“That’s the same smile the earl wore before,” Kyle mumbled. By earl, he was referring to Leon.
Marie continued smiling as she made her way down the stairs and toward the boys.
Brad’s shoulders relaxed. “See? She *is* happy with our gift!”
Chris nodded, pleased. “It was worth going as a group to select them.”
“I only wish we could’ve bought as many flowers as she deserves,” lamented Greg. “Ah, well, next time we get our hands on some cash, we can buy her more then. Anyway, Marie, I’m starvin’. Let’s get some food.” He gave her a thumbs up.
“I’m sorry, everyone. It seems I was mistaken,” said Marie.
She was actually apologizing! Or at least, it seemed that way at first…
“I really am such an idiot. Of course me getting a little angry isn’t going to convince you to change your ways. If that was all it took, I wouldn’t have suffered like this for so long.”
Marie’s smile disappeared. She clenched a fist.
“I was naive. If I’m going to teach you boys anything, it’s going to have to be like this!”
Marie took a large step forward. Greg gaped as her fist flew through the air, into his face, sending him reeling through the air. He slammed into the front door, violently blasting it open as he tumbled outside. He was too stunned to drag himself back to his feet.
It seemed an impossible feat of strength given Marie’s petite size, but unlike in her previous world, in this one, she had magic. Marie used her power to enhance her muscles, giving her fist enough force to send any adult flying.
After watching his friend get his lights punched out, a panicked Jilk quickly stepped in to intervene. “Miss Marie, what in the world are—gwah!”
She smacked him square in the face too. “All of you, line up!” she bellowed. “You’re each going to taste a knuckle sandwich!”
Chris attempted to subdue her. “Marie’s confused! Help me restrain—buh!”
Marie slammed her fist right into his stomach, and he hurtled through the front door to join Greg outside. Then she set her sights on Julius and Brad.
She was huffing and puffing—too wound up for either boy to chance stopping her.

Brad decided to try his hand at diplomacy instead. “I see the bouquets really were too cheap for your tastes. It’s all right. I understand. Instead, today, you may have me as your gift—eeeek!”
The moment he turned to her and smiled, his teeth sparkling white, she planted her fist in his cheek. Brad went spinning through the air, joining the others outside.
As Marie made her slow advance, Julius gaped at her. “Julius, you’re the only one left.”
“Pl-please wait, Marie! What has you so upset? Explain so we can understand where you’re coming from!”
A creepy smile unfolded across Marie’s face as she cracked her knuckles. “It’s precisely because you don’t seem to understand what you’ve done wrong…that I’m throwing all of you out!”
“Y-you’re throwing us—bwaaah!”
Her fist connected with Julius’s jaw, and in seconds, he was out the door.
Having launched them all outside, Marie took her position at the entrance, legs spread firmly beneath her.
“This is a perfect opportunity,” she said. “I’m going to test you all.”
Brad cupped his cheek, frowning. “I have no idea what sort of test you could possibly be talking about, but this unprovoked violence is—”
Marie wasn’t about to humor any complaints.
“There is one thing every last one of you lacks: resourcefulness! For the remainder of summer break, you five will need to make money yourselves.”
Jilk furrowed his brows. “Um, Miss Marie? ‘Make money’ seems far too vague. Exactly what should we be doing? Is there some sort of job we can do here?”
“That’s for you to go out and discover for yourselves. And just so you know, making money as adventurers isn’t going to cut it. You boys need to learn more about the world outside of adventuring.”
All five looked utterly bewildered. Marie snorted. These morons could certainly have made money as adventurers, but they would almost immediately blow it all and then some. This was their chance to learn how respectable society functioned, hence why she forbade them from adventuring to earn coin.
“You may work whatever job you wish, but you need to make money on your own. Learn a little bit more about the world. Oh, and by the way, I prefer a man who knows how to be resourceful *and* dependable. Do you understand what that means? I wonder which one of you will be able to earn the most. I’m looking forward to the results.”
At the mention of a preferred type of man, the boys glanced at one another. Their eyes were the serious eyes of those who regarded their fellows as rivals.
Marie flashed an ominous grin. “You have one month. Return before summer break ends. Oh, and one more thing… You *may* give up and crawl

back to the manor whenever you like. But if you *truly* love me, you can at least do this much, can't you?"

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After the five idiots left, Kyle and Carla set about repairing the front door.
"I wonder if His Highness and the others will be okay?" Carla whispered.
Marie wasn't completely heartless. She gave them each enough money that they could make do for a week. The bigger question was whether they could really make a living by themselves.
Carla was skeptical. The boys were all former heirs, which meant they were pampered rich kids. Naturally, they had never worked a day in their lives, and she questioned whether they could even live on their own at all.
Kyle sighed. "If they get hungry enough, they'll come crawling back. But still, this seems a little uncalled for. She purposefully ensured they would compete against each other. Couldn't she have at least let them cooperate?"
"But as a woman, it's more satisfying to have a bunch of boys fight over you." Carla's cheeks flushed.
Kyle tilted his head. "If you say so. Well, assuming the harshness of the real world sinks in quickly and they make it safely back, I won't have any complaints." Since he had finished fixing the door, he started putting his tools away.
Marie strolled up. Her expression reflected the absolute bliss of a woman who no longer had to babysit five troublemakers. "I see you two are finished with the repairs. In that case, get ready! Today, the three of us are going out to eat!"
Carla gaped. "But Lady Marie, what about our finances?"
"No sweat! Those five won't be coming back for a while, so we have some room in our budget. Besides, you two are always breaking your backs helping out around here. It would be wrong of me not to reward you occasionally. Make sure to eat your fill today!"
Kyle's face lit up. "R-really? You mean it? In that case, I'll order meat!"
Marie set her hands on her hips, chest swelling. "Go ahead! Eat your weight in meat if that's what you want!"
Carla raised her hand. "Excuse me, Lady Marie…"
"Yes, what is it?"
"Does…does that mean we get to have dessert too?!"
Marie grinned from ear to ear at them, even as a tear trickled down her cheek. Being free of the boys had left her in higher spirits than ever. "Eat as much as you want. We already cleaned the place up, so all that's waiting for us when we get back is a nice bath and a warm bed. Until then, let's enjoy some food!"
Thus, the three of them went out to eat. It was such a simple thing, and yet it brought them a uniquely special joy that they had never felt before.

***

Meanwhile, the five boys who'd lost their home made their way to a park. Children played around them as they huddled together in a group, expressions grim.

The first to speak was Jilk. "Miss Marie made it clear: Her heart will go to whichever man is deemed most resourceful."

In short, by the end of this, their group would have a clear winner.

Chris pushed up his glasses as he glared at the other boys. "Which I'm sure means the victor will be whoever earns the most money."

None of them had ever worked a normal job before, but if it meant becoming Marie's favorite, now was as good a time as any to start trying. Ordinarily, they enjoyed a close relationship, but this was a competition. Each of them wanted to win.

Greg folded his arms. "She said we can't make any money adventuring, but don't think that means I'm out of the running. Hate to break it to you boys, but I'm gonna be the winner."

All of them were fired up, and none believed he would lose to the others. Neither would any of them complain about being thrown out of the manor. The most important thing to do was to determine who Marie loved most. The instant she threw them out the door, they became rivals.

Brad flicked his bangs away from his eyes. "We were always going to have to do this one day. You all have my sympathy, however, as Marie will clearly pick me."

The question was always on their minds—who among them would finally claim Marie's heart. With this opportunity, they could finally duke it out for that most precious prize.

Julius glanced at the other boys before placing a hand on his chest. "I will fight and beat all of you fair and square. And then, I will be the one to sit at Marie's side!"

After one final trading of glares, the boys spun around. Each marched off in a separate direction.

"Victory will be mine," said Jilk.

Brad wasn't about to let him have the last word. "Marie will pick me."

Greg snorted. "Yap about it all you like. I'll be the winner!"

"This competition was fate. No more, no less," said Chris.

The final one to speak was Julius. "I look forward to seeing you all again after this."

And so, the five idiots split up. The children playing nearby paused to gawk as the boys left.

***

As suave as his exit from his friends had been, Julius was now in a pinch.

First of all, he was staying at a cheap inn. As he looked for a place to stay, someone had introduced him to it.
“Still, this place is monstrous. It’s like a horse stable.”
It was an inconsiderate thing to say, certainly, but it was his honest appraisal. As a former crown prince, Julius considered inexpensive accommodations unhygienic and thus didn’t want to stay in such a place if he could help it.
More importantly, however…
“I-I don’t have any money…”
As he sat on his bed, he emptied his coin purse. The remainder amounted to little more than pocket change.
“Dammit! I spent too much the first day trying to pump myself up.” It was only the third day, and he was already broke. His funds had dried up fast.
As Julius sat there with his legs crossed beneath him, he folded his arms and contemplated.
“This is a real dilemma. No one will hire me, despite my more than adequate status.”
Julius hadn’t simply been playing around this whole time. He really had tried to look for places that were hiring, and he’d even gone to interviews. Despite his best efforts, no one would take him in.
“What in the world could I be doing wrong?”
If he didn’t find some work by the following evening, he would be out of luck finding lodging even at a cheap inn like this one. This was a real setback.
“But if I’m struggling like this, then surely the others must be as well. I can’t be the only one to run back to the manor with my tail between my legs.”
His friends were surely having a difficult time as well. All Julius could do was put his hopes on what the morrow might bring.

***

The next day, Julius made his way to a restaurant that was hiring. As he stood before the troubled proprietor, he boldly introduced himself.
“I hail from Holfort Kingdom. My name is Julius Rapha Holfort. While I am no longer the heir, I was once crown prince.”
He spoke honestly, hiding not even the embarrassing details. This, he thought, would show sincerity. Being disinherited was a stain on one’s honor, but he could not bear to lie for the sake of employment.
“I am currently studying abroad here in Alzer and trying to learn more about the world. I sincerely hope you will welcome me into your employ!”
The man shook his head. “No way.”
“B-but why not?! If you require proof that I am who I say, I don’t mind if you seek confirmation from the Holfort Embassy. In fact, if it will put you at ease, I will happily accompany you. I am well acquainted with the diplomats there.”

The proprietor's face screwed. "Uh, well, as you can see, this is just a normal restaurant."
"I am aware of that," said Julius. "And you are also hiring, are you not? That is precisely why I came!"
The man averted his eyes. He was so guarded with Julius that they might as well have had a stone wall between them. "I-I'm trying to tell you, there's no way we could hire a former prince!"
"Oh, no, I am still a prince. I am simply no longer in the line of succession."
"All the more reason why we can't bring you on!" cried the proprietor.
W-well, doesn't seem like I'll have any luck here. Julius's shoulders slumped as he shuffled out of the restaurant.

***

As night fell, Julius found himself on a bench, staring up at the sky. "Where did I go wrong?"
Not a single place would hire him, despite the fact that he spoke honestly about his identity. His stomach growled, but he hadn't any coin to spend on food.
"I never imagined it would be this difficult to make money."
I spent too much that first day… If he had kept even half of that, he would have had a bed to sleep on and plenty extra for a meal.
"I wonder how everyone else has fared?"
If Julius was struggling this much, then the other four were surely having their fair share of trouble as well. He worried for them.
"Perhaps I should have a look and see how they're doing."
Julius set out on the town, hoping to distract himself. He also needed to search for a decent place to camp out for the night. In fact, perhaps it was time to give up and head back to the mansion.
The others must be as miserable as I am. We can go to Marie together and apologize.
As Julius settled on that course of action, he soon came upon a lively pub. A sweet and spicy aroma filled the air, teasing his appetite. His stomach was already growling, so he decided to peek inside. Almost immediately, he hid himself from view.
Wh-what's going on here?
Greg was inside, though he wasn't working as a member of the staff but rather visiting as a customer. Since he was seated close to the entrance, Julius could eavesdrop on his conversation with the group he was with.
"Hey, newbie! Eat up! The chicken here is delicious."
"Now you listen here, Greg. Egg is the key. *Raw* egg."
"You moron! The key is protein!"
Greg, who was surrounded by bulky musclemen, seemed to be enjoying himself. Julius had no idea what kind of work he had found, but judging by the look of things, everything was going smoothly for him.

So you're actually making yourself some money. Perhaps I should put in a bit more effort myself then.
If Greg was giving it his all, Julius felt compelled to do the same. He resumed his stroll about the town, where he happened upon Jilk, who was wearing a brand-new suit. He was also carrying a leather travel bag.
"That's Jilk, isn't it?" Julius mumbled to himself.
Jilk was talking with someone, and they were shaking hands and smiling at one another. When they parted, Jilk turned around and spotted Julius.
"Your Highness, is that you?"
"Y-yes… You seem to be in good spirits."
Only a few days had passed, but Jilk was already dressed in new attire.
"Appearances are important. That aside, are things going smoothly for you? I'll have you know that I don't plan to give up without a fight."
Julius felt ashamed for having entertained the idea of crawling back to Marie and begging for forgiveness, but he wasn't about to reveal that truth to Jilk.
"Y-yes, of course it is. I swear I'll come out on top," he said.
"You aren't our prince for nothing! But I won't simply roll over for you."
"Well, having said that, what is the purpose of that outfit?" Julius asked curiously.
Jilk shrugged. "Oh, this? I bought it on my first day. I plan to buy something of higher quality in the future, but for the moment, I am making do with this."
"On the first day?" Julius echoed.
So Jilk had used his funds on clothing, then.
"Anyway, I am afraid I'm in a bit of a hurry, so I must excuse myself. I have my next business negotiation to attend to." Jilk hurriedly sped off, leaving Julius gawking in his wake.
"Did he say business negotiation?"
He and Jilk were foster brothers and the closest of friends, having spent many years together. He'd never dreamed that in the time he was struggling to find his footing, Jilk was already successfully charting his own course.
Julius's shoulders dropped. *What have I even been doing?*
The area around him was humming with activity, and as he tried to peel away, a crowd of customers poured out of one of the nearby buildings. Apparently, it was a theater playing host to performances. Despite its small size, a flood of people left through its doors. They must have been packed tight inside, but they were all smiling.
"What could make them look so happy?" Julius wondered out loud. No sooner had he spoken than he spotted the signboard. He sucked in a breath, eyes going wide with shock.
The huge poster read: The "Peerless" Magician, Li'l Brad's Magic Show.
Those who had attended it chatted amongst themselves as they left.
"Lord Brad was incredible today too."

“I think I’ll come back to see him tomorrow!”
“Me too!”
The women weren’t the only ones who had enjoyed themselves. Men made similar comments.
“Who knew Brad had such talent as an entertainer?”
It was difficult for Julius to believe that the Brad he knew was some popular performer. He wanted to think this was some kind of mistake, but then he realized that was his own jealousy speaking. He shook his head, trying to drive off such thoughts.
I am utterly pathetic.
He reminded himself that it was important to recognize a friend’s best efforts and resolved to find a place to sleep for the night. It was then that he stumbled into Chris.
“Hm? Your Highness?”
“Chris?”
Chris was in the same outfit he’d been wearing when Marie threw them out, but his hands were full, indicating he’d stopped somewhere to buy things before heading home.
“Heading somewhere with all of that?” Julius asked.
“Yes. The store where I work has me doing chores. But just you wait, I’ll be making even more money soon enough.”
It was then that Julius realized: Could it…could it be that I’m the only one who hasn’t found employment yet…?
Chris flashed a smile at Julius as he spoke, but none of his words made it to Julius’s ears. Not until he finally asked, “By the way, where are you working, Your Highness? There’s a bath house close to here that’s—”
Julius took off running—no, retreating.
“I really am the only one who hasn’t found a job!” he cried.
Chris dropped his jaw and called out after the prince. “Your Highness! What’s the matter?!”
“Gyaaaaaaaaaah!”
Julius had been so convinced that the others were floundering like him that he’d resolved himself to find them and go groveling back to Marie, but now he felt utterly pathetic.
He ran and ran and kept running, as if trying to flee from his own shame.

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Julius came to the edge of a river, taking a seat under the bridge. He spaced out as he watched the water’s flow.
“Everyone else is actually putting their best foot forward, and I’m the only one without a job.”
The other four must have found their employment quickly. By the looks of things, Jilk and Brad had already made plenty of money. He had no idea how Greg and Chris were faring in comparison, but they were certainly

doing better than Julius, who didn't even have a penny to his name. Of the five of them, he was the deadweight. Julius was left dumbfounded by the realization.
"If I go crawling back by myself, any affection Marie ever had for me will vanish."
Melancholy swept over Julius. As he stewed, footsteps echoed, indicating someone was approaching. When he looked up, he spotted a man in his fifties.
"Hey there, you don't look so well."
"Y-yes, I suppose not." Julius barely finished speaking before his stomach growled, giving him further cause for embarrassment. He dropped his gaze.
The man chuckled. "Hungry? Well, good timin'. Why don't you grab a bite from my place?" He was tugging along a food cart. It had a sign with the Alzerian word for "skewers" written on it. Drool nearly dribbled down Julius's chin.
"A-apologies, but I'm afraid I don't have much coin with me," said Julius.
"How much you got?"
After Julius showed the man, the man patted him on the back. "That'll get ya three skewers. I'll even throw in some extras, so come on." Apparently, he'd only just pulled out his cart for the evening, so he didn't have any other customers yet.
As the man started grilling some skewers, Julius watched, his eyes sparkling.
"You like 'em that much?" asked the man.
"I do!"
After Julius bit into one, he silently scarfed it and the others he'd bought right down. They were more delicious than anything he'd ever tasted before, perhaps because he was so famished.
"That tasted amazing," he muttered.
"You've got the look on you of someone in a pickle," said the man. "What happened to ya?"
Julius pursed his lips at first, unsure of what to say, but since the man had been kind enough to share extra food with him, he shared his story honestly. This time, however, he decided not to elaborate more than was necessary. "I was thrown out of my home and told to make it on my own for the next month."
"Judging by yer looks, I'd guess you're a pampered rich boy. Well, I'm sure it'd do ya some good to learn the ways of the world."
"Yes, but no one will hire me. Everyone else I know has already found work. I'm the only one who was left behind."
As Julius sank into misery once more, the man stroked his chin.
"You just need work for a month, yeah?"

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The next day…
“Welcome!” Julius called out as cheerfully as he could, an apron hooked around his waist.
When the regulars stopped by, they immediately began teasing the owner—or Chief, as they called him.
“Looks like your new hire’s got a lot of energy.”
“You hanging up your apron for good, Chief?”
“Well, he *is* getting up there in years.”
While the customers shot cruel remarks his way, the owner focused on grilling the food as he barked back, “Buncha morons! I’ll be here cooking ’til I kick the bucket. This kid was in a fix, so I’m looking after him for the next month. Hey, Julius, give me a hand here.”

JAGJOR

“Yes, Chief!”
Julius was working at the stall as the owner’s assistant.

Chapter 4:
The Great House Barielle

HOUSE BARIELLE—in other words, Loic's family—was one of the Alzer Republic's Six Great Houses and one of the most powerful among them at that. It was for that very reason that its leader, Bellange Leta Barielle, was displeased with their present circumstances.

Bellange had an excellent physique, with chiseled arms and a broad face and chin. Imposing and heroic were the first words to come to mind when a person looked at him. And if there was one thing that irritated the man, it was Albergue's spineless foreign policy with regard to Holfort.

"Does that fool not understand that by acting subserviently, we only diplomatically hamstring ourselves in the future?"

An earl from Holfort had antagonized House Feivel without provocation. On the surface, they had played off the incident as Alzerian nobles feuding amongst themselves, but knowing the truth, Bellange simmered with fury. Feivel was one of the weakest of the Six Great Houses, and yet Holfort had let their victory over the house go to their head.

Although it got under Bellange's skin, if one were to ask him whether he planned to avenge House Feivel or not, he wouldn't have hesitated to say no. He was wise enough to know that he would wrest no easy victory from Leon if they were to fight. But that was precisely why Albergue's attitude irritated him so.

"We should have combined the might of our five houses to deal with the situation. Instead, Albergue handled it without regard for the rest of us."

Bellange and Albergue weren't mere rivals. It went beyond that—they were enemies. Despite the fact that both of their houses stood at the top with almost equal power, when House Lespinasse fell, it had been the Raults who took up the mantle of chairman over the joint assembly. Bellange couldn't stand his house's inferior standing.

"Is there no way I might steal the seat of chairman from Albergue?"

As he contemplated this idea, a subordinate hurried over to him with a report. "Lord Bellange, sir, um…"

Bellange glared at the stuttering man. "Hurry and spit it out. What is Loic up to now?"

His son Loic was to be the next head of Barielle, but lately, his behavior had been rather…bizarre. Bellange had heard the rumors that Loic was enchanted with a peasant girl some time ago, but his problematic conduct had begun to escalate recently, so Bellange had directed his men to investigate.

"It's true what they say. He's had his eye on a girl, and there are even untoward whispers about it at the academy."

“How disgraceful for the next head of my house.” Bellange shook his head. He considered having Loic brought back home for a strict scolding that would set him straight.
“However, there is something curious about the girl in question.”
“Hm?” Bellange placed a cigar between his lips and lit it as he listened.
“The Beltre sisters are actually twins. The younger of the two is in a romantic relationship with House Pleven’s young Lord Emile.”
“What a nuisance,” Bellange grumbled. Pleven was another of the Great Houses, and if Loic caused trouble for one of its descendants, it would be difficult to sweep under the rug. But that was the extent of Bellange’s concern.
“I looked into it a bit further, and it seems there’s a high possibility these Beltre sisters are actually from House Lespinasse.”
The cigar fell from Bellange’s lips. He shot out of his chair. “House Lespinasse?! You’re telling me there were survivors? No, that must mean those twins are… But it couldn’t be.”
An image of two young girls sprang to his mind—two young blonde-and-pink-haired girls, as he last remembered seeing them. They had been the heirs of their house as well as possible candidates for the position of Priestess. Suddenly, his expression changed.
“Did Albergue allow them to live? No, that bastard would never… Unless he had some reason for it?”
His subordinate grimaced. “Lord Bellange, what would you like us to do about Lord Loic?”
“Bring him back here!”
Bellange needed to hear the full story from his son’s lips.

***

Having left Marie’s estate, Noelle returned to her apartment and the life she’d led prior to Leon’s arrival. There was no need to visit the academy, since it was still summer break.
When Lelia went out that morning, Noelle was left all to herself. She decided to spend her time shopping to prepare for dinner.
“What shall I make today? I know Leon loves meat and fish, but—ah?!”
It was force of habit. When she’d helped out in the kitchen at Marie’s place, Noelle had often found herself wondering what Leon might enjoy. Her heart squeezed painfully, but she played it off with a laugh.
“I really am completely hopeless. My crush on him is over. I need to get my mind off of him and focus on other things.”
She looked at the calendar. Lelia had circled the date.
“Lelia has plans today, so she won’t be coming back tonight, huh?”
Noelle had no idea what these plans were, but Lelia had been fired up this morning as she got herself ready. Considering Emile’s car had come to retrieve her, Noelle could only guess it was a date.

“Lelia has always been so smooth at romance. Meanwhile, I’ve always been such a klutz.”
Although they were twins, it was always Lelia who had everything together and earned the approval of others. Even their parents had held great expectations for her.
“But I’m the older one, so I need to shape up and act like it.”
Staying cooped up inside would only dampen her spirits, so Noelle decided to leave and go shopping. As she was locking the door on her way out, a voice called to her from behind.
“Heya, Noelle.”
Flustered, she whipped around to find Loic with a collar dangling from his right hand. A chill ran down her spine. She tried to bolt back inside, but he slammed his hand against the door to stop her. The sound of impact echoed.
“Don’t try to run.” Loic fixed his ominous gaze on her, his yellow eyes narrowing.
Noelle flinched. “You—you know this is pointless, don’t you? I won’t go out with you no matter what you do. And there’s no way the heir of one of the Six Great Houses could even be with someone like me.”
Loic smiled, stroking her cheek. “With the power I wield, nothing can stop me from having you. Even if I have to agree to a political marriage, you’ll still be my number one priority. Noelle, be my—”
Unable to stand his touch any longer, Noelle slapped him. In that same instant, the bandage that had covered the back of her right hand came loose.
Loic’s eyes flew open when he spotted the crest.
Oh, no! Realizing her folly, Noelle clapped her left hand over her right, trying to hide it. Then she shoved Loic and scrambled past him to escape.
“W-wait! Noelle, that mark…!” Loic snarled after her.
Her heart hammered with fear.
I need to escape, she thought as she ran with all her might.
Alas, Loic’s athletic build allowed him to easily catch up to her. He grabbed her by the arm, yanking her back. “Noelle, show me! That crest you bear—”
“L-Let go of me!”
Loic kept her pinned as she struggled. An unsettling grin stretched across his face. Realizing her secret was out, Noelle panicked.
This is bad. If Loic knows I have the Priestess’s Crest, it’ll only make more trouble for Leon.
The Alzer Republic would go to any lengths to secure her and the sapling once they found out. Try as she might to flee, Loic was too strong for her.
“Noelle, let me get a good look at your crest! I know what that is. I *know.* I’ve seen it before.” Loic’s smile had turned completely deranged.
A needle of fear ran through Noelle. She snapped her eyes shut.
“Get off her, you bastard!” someone snarled.
By the time Noelle opened her eyes again, Marie had already come barreling down the road. She soared through the air, her foot connecting

with Loic. Despite her petite stature, she somehow sent Loic flying. Marie landed gracefully as a cat, readying herself in case she had to whip out her martial arts skills.
“What kind of creep are you, attacking a lady in the middle of the day?! If you lay a single finger on her, I’ll sic Leon on you and have your whole house burned to the ground!”
Despite the threat of Leon looming over him, a faint smile remained on Loic’s face, as if he hadn’t even heard Marie’s warning. He thumbed away the trickle of blood running down from his nose and kept his eyes on Noelle.
“It was as I thought, Noelle. The two of us are bound by fate.”
Noelle clamped her left hand over her right, but Loic already knew her secret. *What do I do now? People will realize I’m a survivor of House Lespinasse.*
Loic pulled himself back to his feet and glared at Marie. “Be gone with you, woman. This matter doesn’t involve anyone but Noelle and me.”
Marie’s brow twitched, anger boiling within her. “Think again, you stalker perv. Can’t you get it through your thick skull that she doesn’t want you? Keep this up and you’ll end up like Pierre—unprotected.”
Unable to tolerate this impertinence any longer, Loic raised his hand, his crest glowing. Noelle jumped in front of Marie to shield her.
“Rie, you can’t pick a fight with him,” said Noelle. “He really is strong!”
Marie shook her head. “I already know that! But if anything happens to you, my brother will have it out for me!”
Noelle froze for a moment, not knowing who this brother could possibly be, but she didn’t have the luxury of trying to puzzle out that mystery at present.
Right as Loic was about to unleash his magic on them, several cars pulled up nearby. The doors flew open and men hopped out, hurriedly seizing Loic. Noelle and Marie gaped while Loic struggled to break free.
“Unhand me! How dare you!”
“Lord Bellange wishes to see you. Please come quietly!”
The instant Loic heard that name, he stopped resisting. “My father has summoned me?”
“Y-yes! He wants you to come to the Barielle estate right away.”
Noelle could only assume that these men were retainers of Loic’s household. For some reason, several of them sneaked glances at her.
Loic paused to contemplate for a few moments before obediently slipping into one of the vehicles. As the door closed, he flashed a smile at Noelle.
“Wait for me just a little bit longer,” he said. “I swear I’ll come to fetch you.”
When they left, Marie hollered after them. “And don’t ever show your face here again, you big douche!”
Noelle wrapped her arms around herself, crumpling to her knees. Her face was pale, and her whole body was shivering.

Marie looked down at her. “Noelle, pull yourself together! Come to my place, okay? At least for now. I swear I’ll protect you.”
And so, Noelle took refuge at Marie’s estate once more.

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Loic sat on a couch at his father’s house, grinning from ear to ear. A table stood between him and Bellange, and the latter was red with fury.
“Did I not tell you that today is an important day?”
“Yes, I know that. House Rault and House Druille announced their engagement, yes?”
“Precisely. And what were you thinking, frolicking off in the meantime?! Not to mention, I thought you understood the significance of that collar—what were you doing, walking around with it? If you had caused a fuss with that, it would have put our house in a terrible position!”
The collar in question sat on the table between them, and it was no ordinary collar. A chain was attached to it so that whomever it was secured to would be unable to escape. At the other end was a bracelet that the owner could secure to their wrist.
“Father, this is the engagement ring I was going to give Noelle.”
“What part of this collar looks like a ring to you? Are you an imbecile? This item has a part of the Sacred Tree embedded in it. If you attach it to yourself, you will never be able to remove it.” Bellange shook his head, choosing to ignore his son’s babble about an engagement. “More importantly, did you know that girl’s true identity from the beginning?”
“Her true identity?” Loic echoed.
“Then you *didn’t* know? That girl is a survivor of House Lespinasse. I don’t believe you ever met them when you were younger, but you know that House Lespinasse had two daughters, yes? Twins.”
Loic vaguely recalled hearing about that. “I didn’t think House Rault would let anyone slip through their fingers, but I see. Now it all makes sense.”
Bellange scowled. “You idiot of a son. If you could have established a romantic relationship with one of those girls, we could have welcomed them into our home and reestablished their house. Instead, you’ve frightened her half to death. What were you thinking?!”
With the situation as it stood, Bellange wanted to get his hands on Noelle even if he had to do so by some less than savory means. As for Loic, having seen the crest on the back of Noelle’s hand, his head had finally cooled.
The longer Lord Albergue monopolizes the position of chairman, the more it will chafe at Father’s pride, Loic realized. He could surmise that his father wanted to use Noelle to wrest the seat of chairman from his enemy. Or perhaps he wanted to make Noelle the Priestess and wield the power that would bring to their house.

“It would be the perfect pretense for taking down Albergue,” said Bellange. “I’ll send someone to retrieve her, but don’t you dare touch a hair on her head.”
These words puzzled Loic. Then he doesn’t plan to nominate her to be Priestess? Well, it’s no matter either way.
Whether his father did so or not, Noelle had already acquired the Priestess’s Crest.
“Father, I am afraid I cannot abide by that. Noelle and I must marry.”
“Do *not* disappoint me any further, boy. You will be doing no such thing.” His voice would brook no argument.
“It’s for the sake of our house,” Loic protested. “She already has the Priestess’s Crest on her hand.”
Bellange shot out of his seat, jaw hanging open. “That can’t be!”
Loic snickered inwardly. Now you definitely won’t be able to run from me, Noelle.

***

The Six Great Houses and their closest friends and allies were all gathered at a party venue. Lelia wore a fine dress, accompanying Emile as his partner.
“It’s only an engagement announcement,” she said. “Hard to believe all of the Great Houses are gathered here. Surely many of them are political rivals.”
Emile smiled wryly. “True enough, but alliances can change from generation to generation. Besides, we’re all from families recognized by the Sacred Tree. We should get along with one another when we can.”
“Huh.” Lelia wasn’t too interested in that. What concerned her more was one specific love interest who would be present at the event.
I really screwed things up. Since Loic always got so jealous over other boys, I didn’t let Noelle get close to the other love interests. Now that’s come back to bite me in the butt.
In the otome game, Loic was extraordinarily possessive. If the player was too free with their affections, it would anger him and result in a bad ending. That was why Lelia had kept her sister from meeting the prerequisites for triggering the route for Hugues (and Hugues’s obsession with his brother.)
Louise wore a stunning dress, and Hugues stood beside her, the top buttons of his suit left open, tie hanging loose. He had the same golden-blond hair as his older brother Fernand, though he let his grow longer. His green eyes hung half-lidded with boredom, but he was a handsome man by any definition. He did look a bit like a delinquent, but that was part of his charm.
He may be way too fixated on his brother, but I still should have picked him over Loic. I guess it’s too late to regret that now though.

The player had to meet the prerequisites for the Hugues route early on or they would lose the opportunity, and he would instead become engaged to Louise. In the game, it was impossible to romance him after that. Reality didn't seem to be any more forgiving. He was probably a lost cause.
Desperate to find something to talk about, Emile started babbling. "Uh, so anyway… It looks like the ties between House Rault and House Druille will be strengthened with this union. Lord Albergue and Druille's leader, Lord Fernand, have been on good terms for a while now, but this just gives their alliance more political weight."
"Well, it *is* a political marriage, right?" said Lelia.
"Y-yes. It is, but also…well, I hope this will help Lord Hugues settle down a bit."
Hugues was a ladies' man in the game, and he wasn't much different in reality. Even after word of his engagement with Louise came out, he still messed around.
Rault will lose their position anyway, and Louise will no longer be a noble by the end. That said, she sure is an impressive villainess. I wonder if she somehow realized I'm not the real protagonist.
Louise, for whatever reason, had never messed with Lelia. Her only target was Noelle. It was as if her intuition told her that Noelle was the true lead character—at least, that was how it felt to Lelia.
The newly engaged couple made their way over toward Emile. Lelia slipped behind him, hiding.
"Heya, Emile," said Hugues. "Never dreamed you'd bring your girlfriend with you." He spoke far too casually for an aristocrat.
Emile hesitated. "Your clothes are a bit rumpled."
"Eh, who cares? It's all family and friends here anyhow. We've all known each other since forever."
He had a point; all the people at the party had been acquainted with one another for a long time. Perhaps that was why Hugues felt so at ease.
As Louise stood beside her betrothed, her gaze wandered over to Lelia. "How is your sister doing? Well?"
The question came across as snide, but Lelia only shrugged. "Yes, well enough."
That was a complete lie. Noelle was heartbroken and depressed, but Lelia wasn't about to reveal that kind of private information to the enemy.
Louise smiled. "I see. Well, Emile, you seem to cherish this girl so much. You had best take good care of her."
Emile stood a little straighter. "Yes, ma'am."
As the two left to continue greeting their guests, Lelia let out a sigh. "That sounded so sarcastic. I'm sure she really wanted to say that I don't belong in a place like this."
Emile tilted his head. "You think so? It sounded to me like she was being sincere. Besides, Louise has always been very kind."

“What part of that woman is kind? You know how much she’s picked on my sister—it’s practically part of her daily routine.”
“Y-yeah, but I’ve known her for a long time.”
Emile’s attitude frustrated Lelia. Is this the type of guy he is? If we get married, will he still put his house before me and leave me to fend for myself?
It made her anxious about the future.
Ignorant of her inner thoughts, Emile kept his eyes on Louise, who seemed to be enjoying herself in conversation. His eyes filled with sadness. “After her younger brother died, she was inconsolable. She may look fine now, but it was heartbreaking to watch her back then.”
“Her younger brother? What?” Lelia’s face screwed in thought. *He’s talking like she has some other sibling besides Serge.*
Loic arrived at the venue belatedly and made his way over to Louise and Hugues. Lelia dragged Emile over so she could stand close enough to eavesdrop.
“Hugues, congratulations.” Loic smiled.
Hugues scowled. “It’s just an engagement. No congrats to be had here. Louise and I have known each other for forever, and this is purely political.”
Neither of them had any romantic feelings for the other. However, Louise did look a bit dejected.
Boy, does it feel good to watch her get exactly what she deserves, Lelia thought. Louise was always bullying Noelle; it was only right for karma to punish her.
Since the two boys were chatting away, Louise excused herself, claiming she needed a break. As soon as she was gone, Loic’s tone turned serious.
“Hugues, there’s something important I need to speak with you about. I would like you to summon Lord Fernand for me.”
“My brother? Do you know what you’re asking? Our houses are at odds right now.”
“That’s completely contingent upon present circumstances, isn’t it? Besides, Druille only stands to benefit from what I have to say.”
As Lelia listened in, Loic shot a sharp look her way. She hurriedly averted her gaze and turned toward the exit.
“Emile, I need to go get some air.”
“Huh? Oh, o-okay.”

***

After fixing her makeup, Lelia exited the bathroom, where she found Loic waiting for her.
“Hey there, Lelia.”
“Loic.” She glared at him, but it seemed to have little effect.
He smiled at her. “Come now, don’t scowl at me like that. I come to you with a proposal that I think you’ll like.”

“What do you mean by that?”
“You know as well as I do that you won’t be able to marry Emile with things the way they stand currently.”
Emile was descended from one of the Six Great Houses. Since Lelia was currently nothing more than a peasant, the gap between them was near insurmountable. Their marriage would in theory become possible, depending on how things turned out with Noelle, but Lelia wasn’t about to share that information.
“Well…yes. But what of it?” she asked.
“I told you, no need to be so hostile. I’m offering to lend you a hand and set you up so you can marry Emile no problem. In fact, should we include him in this conversation?”
Lelia furrowed her brows. She couldn’t get a read on Loic at all. “Look, if this is about my sister, she’s made it clear that she—”
“I know that. I’m the one at fault.”
“What?”
Loic looked genuinely repentant, contrary to how stubborn and insistent he’d been up until this point. “It was my fault for frightening her so terribly. That’s why I want to enlist your help.”
“Are you really serious?”
“Of course I am. I don’t want to scare Noelle. I simply want to be in a loving relationship with her, like the one you share with Emile. No, sorry, that’s an understatement. I want really want to commit to her.”
His playful attitude coaxed Lelia into gradually lowering her guard. “What are you planning?”
The mirth in Loic’s eyes faded as he turned serious. “Lelia, you and Noelle are survivors from House Lespinasse, aren’t you?”
Lelia held her breath. She’d never dreamed anyone would find out their identities so quickly. As panic started to overcome her, Loic placed a hand on her shoulder as if to console her.
“Don’t worry. I’ll protect you. The reason I want Emile’s help is because there are people out there who are after you and your sister.”
Someone was targeting them? Lelia could easily guess who that might be.
“House Rault?”
“That’s right,” said Loic. “It will prove difficult to take down the current chairman, but my house will back and protect you both. To be honest, I’ve already seen what’s on the back of Noelle’s hand.”
Sweat beaded on Lelia’s brow. Oh crap. This is bad. This is really bad! If Loic somehow finds out that Leon has the Guardian’s Crest, who knows what he’ll do?!
While the Priestess traditionally chose her guardian, Leon had been the first one to receive a crest. There was a high possibility that Loic would mistakenly assume Noelle had selected Leon. Given his possessive nature, there was no telling how he might lash out. Even if they tried to resolve the

misunderstanding, the fact was that Noelle really did have feelings for Leon. The order of these things wouldn't change the result.
"Loic, um, you see…"
"It's the Priestess's Crest," said Loic. "Noelle has been chosen. Lelia, I want you to help me. I swear I won't make the same mistake this time."
"Huh?"
"If Noelle picks me as her Guardian, House Barielle will provide you both with its protection. You'll lend me a hand, won't you?"
Lelia's head was spinning. This at least confirmed that he didn't yet know about Leon's crest. "S-sorry, I'm a little confused right now."
"Apologies. Perhaps I was a bit hasty. Regardless, if anything happens, I hope you'll turn to me for help."
Lelia gave him a small nod and watched as he turned and left. So he's finally cooled his head. Maybe my sister will actually…
Now that Loic had his act together, she might actually be able to entrust Noelle to him.

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After turning his back toward Lelia, an eerie grin spread over Loic's face.
Noelle, only a little bit longer and you'll finally be mine.
He had calmed down, yes, but only because he had finally thought up a surefire plan to get his hands on Noelle. His status had been an obstacle up until this point—small though he thought it—and it hadn't helped that Noelle refused him at every turn. Now, he had the perfect excuse to make her his wife.
Sensing a presence approaching, Loic quickly plastered a more socially appropriate smile on his face.
"Loic, it's been a while. You certainly have grown," said Fernand as he strolled up with Hugues close behind him.
"You say that every time we see each other."
The two shook hands, and Fernand smiled.
"It's a stock phrase. I hope you won't hold it against me. More importantly, I heard you have something important to discuss?"
"We should find somewhere more private for this conversation. It's a delicate subject pertaining to Alzer's future."
Fernand narrowed his eyes, and Hugues quickly cut in, "You'd better not be wasting my brother's precious time."
"Enough, Hugues," said Fernand. "There's no harm in hearing him out."
Hugues scowled but didn't push the matter any further.
"Much appreciated. Now, if you will come this way…"
The three disappeared into an empty room.

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Meanwhile, in one of the lounges at the party venue, Louise was conversing with her father.
Albergue wore a troubled expression. “Hugues isn’t much of a gentleman, is he? Going off to have fun while leaving his betrothed behind.”
“This is a political arrangement.” Louise shook her head. “Love isn’t part of the equation. I am marrying for the sake of my house.”
“Even so, Louise, there is no rule saying you cannot find happiness.”
Albergue paused. “However, there is something on my mind.”
“What’s that?”
Louise looked entirely grown up in her elegant party dress. Gazing at the woman she had blossomed into made Albergue beam with pride.
“I wonder if perhaps you would have preferred to marry Earl Bartfort instead.”
Although Albergue was only teasing, Louise’s entire face burned bright red—all the way to her ears. “D-don’t be absurd! Do you even hear yourself? He’s like a little brother to me.”
“Aha ha ha. Well, if he didn’t already have two fiancées of his own, I might have been able to force an arrangement. Seems I’ve let my personal feelings get the better of me.” A part of Albergue wanted to forge a personal link to Leon, and he was ashamed for feeling that way. He sighed. “Your wedding will be after graduation, but you’ll have to live with Hugues in the meantime.”
“Yes, I know.”
Albergue dropped his gaze to the floor. “I’m sorry, Louise, for using you as a political chip in my game. Had I not, you might have found someone else to love and marry—if you don’t have such a person in mind already.”
Maybe she already did. Or maybe she would have found one in the future. Regardless, it was a moot point now.
“I was born into one of the Six Great Houses. I long gave up on such dreams. After all, talks of Leon’s engagement were already being made when he was only five years old.” Louise was referring to her little brother, not the man with whom the two had recently become acquainted.
As soon as she realized what she’d said, Louise slapped a hand over her mouth, but Albergue didn’t blame her for it.
“Yes, you’re right. If he were still alive, I would have nothing to worry about. Alas, my only son now is Serge. Until he becomes an adult, I’ll have to continue shouldering the burdens of our house.”
The moment she heard her foster brother’s name, Louise’s mood soured. “I *hate* that boy.”
“You’re siblings now. I would like you to accept him.”
They had been resting here for far too long now. Albergue started toward the door. “Louise,” he called behind him, “I realize it may be difficult for you, but I hope you will give him a chance.”
Once the door closed and he was gone, Louise gritted her teeth. “The only brother I have ever had or will ever have is Leon.” Tears welled in her eyes,

and she tried desperately to hold them back. “Why? Why did you have to die, Leon?”
Louise continued to reminisce until a servant popped in, worried that she had been absent from the party for too long.

Chapter 5:
Oblivious

"SO WHAT? You're telling me you were exchanging letters with Clarice and Deirdre too?"
We were in Holfort's capital, leisurely enjoying some tea at the Redgrave estate. It was such an indulgent moment that I actually felt like true nobility, which was why I made the mistake of letting my guard down.
"Yep."
Angie was seated in front of me with a blank expression, while Livia, seated beside her, smiled pleasantly enough.
"Mr. Leon, didn't you also send letters to the queen?" Livia asked. "I seem to remember you asking us to deliver one to her."
"I sure did."
That's right, I'd asked my fiancées to deliver a letter I'd written to another woman I fancied. It didn't take a genius to identify the stupidity in that strategy.
Alas, our little teatime had been rather enjoyable up until that point. I'd assumed there was no more reason to be worried, as I had already resolved the misunderstanding that brought Angie and Livia racing to the republic to confront me in the first place. Thus, being the idiot I was, I ran my mouth.
"Boy," I'd said, "you don't know how panicked I was, wondering what I could have possibly done this time to piss you guys off."
I'm an idiot. A moron. A complete imbecile! I thought as soon as I realized my mistake.
I shot a pleading look at Luxion. He picked up on my cue and inserted himself into the conversation. "I fear you girls have vastly underestimated my master. He hasn't even begun to answer for his numerous offenses—many of which you haven't yet uncovered."
If their eyes had been cold before, they were now well below freezing.
I grabbed my robot companion with both hands and pressed my face close to his. "What's your problem, huh? Spit it out! Why do you hate my guts so much? This is the part where you're supposed to communicate with me telepathically and stick up for me!"
"Master, I believe there is much for you to reflect on. Perhaps you should face the crimes you have committed—including those not yet brought up in this conversation. Oh, though I am sure you are as yet oblivious to many of these transgressions."
"What 'transgressions' are you even talking about?!"
"The fact that you cannot answer for yourself is precisely the problem. Moreover, I am so strict with you solely for your own benefit. Do you not see how much I care for you?"
That's a load of bull if I've ever heard it.

I wasn't yearning for tough love from an AI. If anything, I wanted him to baby me more! Besides, what I really needed right now was some makeshift excuse to get me out of this mess.
"Well then, Leon, I think it's time for you to tell us everything," said Angie. "That includes these supposed transgressions of yours, as well as everything that happened prior to your return from the republic."
Livia latched onto my arm. "Mr. Leon, though you may not be aware, we're both very busy."
Yes, they were—or they were supposed to be. Angie was leading the second-years while Livia looked after the scholarship students. They no doubt had a list of other matters to attend to during summer break.
"But," Livia went on, "we completed almost all the work we had to do during the first half of break so we could visit you. That means you don't have to worry; we have all the time in the world to spend with you."
"Wow, that sure is incredible. I guess you girls have already finished your summer homework too?"
I was the procrastinating type that did all of my homework last minute. It was only human nature to want to test the limits of one's abilities, after all. Angie and Livia, however, were nothing like me.
"Rest assured, I have already completed almost all of mine," said Angie.
Livia nodded. "Yes, I've finished all that I could as well."
Amazing! I haven't even started on the homework they gave me in Alzer. I grinned. "You girls never fail to impress. I'll have to prepare some even nicer tea leaves for you then."
Angie smiled. "There's no need to fuss over us. We'll be married in the future, remember. We're happy to drink whatever tea you prepare, regardless of the price."
Her words were endearing, but there did seem to be an underlying message: *We aren't going to let you escape us.* Her attitude further made clear that she wouldn't tolerate me trying to change the topic to distract them. Sadly, Livia seemed to be on the same page.
"Agreed," she said. "Which is why we would like you to tell us about these other offenses."
Well, now what?
There were way too many "offenses" to list. I didn't even know where to begin.

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A maid peeked in on the tea party. Here at the Redgrave estate, many servants looked after Angie. The majority of them hailed from knight houses and had received an education at the academy. Some aristocratic daughters from earldoms, viscounties, or baronies were among them as well.
However, in the wake of the war with the former Principality of Fanoss, the majority of the houses that had betrayed the duchy had been punished. The

same went for their daughters and sons who had turned their backs on Angie. Due to that, the number of high-ranking maids at the Redgrave's estate had thinned considerably.

One of the remaining high-ranking maids was named Cordelia Fou Easton, and she had been taking care of Angie since she was a little girl.

Cordelia was currently twenty-four years old. She had worked at the duke's estate since she was young, learning proper upper-class etiquette in the process. Due to the age difference between herself and Angie, she had been unable to attend the academy with her mistress and become a proper member of her entourage, but they had known each other for years nonetheless.

At present, Cordelia was studying Angie and her guests, her face devoid of emotion. "That man," she whispered. "I cannot believe he would make a move on another woman—foreign or otherwise—when he has Lady Angelica at his side."

The other maids traded troubled looks.

"Lady Cordelia, please calm down."

Cordelia's normally expressionless face contorted, lending her the air of an enraged demon. "How can you expect me to calm down?! Do you even realize the horrific treatment our lady endured because of that witch Marie? She stole that idiotic prince from Lady Angelica and made a fool of her in public!"

"D-don't you think calling him an idiotic prince is a bit too—okay, no, never mind." One of the maids tried to scold Cordelia, but the latter's ire was so intimidating that she changed her tune midway.

"Surely he realized the lady was worried he might be unfaithful. And in spite of that, he still two-timed!"

"Uh, um, I heard he didn't actually cheat."

"The issue is that he did anything to make her second-guess him to begin with!"

The previous year, Julius had broken his engagement to Angie. His reasoning had been as unconscionable as the act itself, and House Redgrave's displeasure with the royal family only mounted. Cordelia remained most frustrated that Angie's own entourage had betrayed her.

"Everyone close to the lady turned their backs on her. Do you know how depressed she was? Supposedly Leon was aware, yet immediately after their engagement, he was off cavorting with other women. I won't let him get away with it!"

The other maids thought she was going overboard, but Cordelia did remind them of how terribly Angie had suffered just a year ago, which roused their anger at Leon.

All that being said, Cordelia thought it best to come up with some way to curb Leon's wandering affections.

"They should send someone to keep an eye on him while he's abroad," she said.

***

At that same time, Leon was inadvertently causing problems elsewhere—at his own family's estate. Nicks, having graduated from the academy, was living at home, training to become the next regional lord.

But as of that moment, he was panicking.

"Father, are you sure we can just leave things as they are? Leon's a loose cannon. There's no telling what he'll do next."

Cold sweat beaded on Balcus's forehead. If Leon's story about the republic was to be believed, he'd picked a fight with one of their most powerful families. As if that weren't enough…

"I owe Duke Redgrave and his house an apology for Leon's behavior."

Leon was also suspected of two-timing. He had denied the allegations, and Angie and Livia seemed willing to believe him, but that did little to alleviate Nicks's concerns. This was Leon they were talking about, after all. He felt like he was losing his mind.

"I don't actually think Leon would cheat," he clarified. "But he's pretty incompetent when it comes to dealing with women."

Balcus shot his son an icy look. "As if you're any better. You graduated, yet you still haven't found anyone to marry."

"My case is very different, I'll have you know! Besides, I assumed my older brother—uh, Rutart, that is—would be your heir. I never dreamed he wasn't actually your son!"

Nicks did, admittedly, have his own exceptional circumstances.

"Anyway, let's not get off track," said Nicks. "The point is, I don't think Leon would cheat. I mean that. But he's got a strange habit of making women fall for him. I don't know what it is, but a certain kind of woman is drawn to him like a bee to a…really weird flower."

Angie and Livia weren't the only ones—he had become close to Clarice and Deirdre as well.

Balcus covered his face with both hands. "Don't bring that up. I don't even want to think about it. It makes my stomach knot up. Minister Bernard keeps asking me what I think about his daughter as a match for Leon. This is a minister we're talking about here—not some backwoods baron!"

The difference in status between Balcus and Bernard was like the difference between the earth and sky, which was exactly why he was at a loss when it came to replying to the latter's talk of engagement. Unlike Bernard, the Bartforts *were* a backwoods barony.

"Father, if Leon does the same thing in the republic, what are we going to do then? If he ensnares some high-ranking noble girl, don't you think it's going to spell big trouble for us? Besides, Leon *is* a man. It's not out of the realm of possibility that he might actually cheat at some point."

And if he did, there was no telling how House Redgrave would choose to respond. At that point, Nicks and Balcus would have to beg for forgiveness

and admit their failure as family members to hold Leon to a higher standard.
As the two men sulked, Leon's mother, Luce, stepped inside the room.
"What are you boys in here moping about?"
Balcus lifted his face. "Call it moping if you like, but this is a serious dilemma."
"In that case, why don't we send someone with Leon to keep an eye on him?"
"What do you mean by that?" Balcus asked, tilting his head in confusion.
Their maid, Yumeria, stepped into the room. She still looked like a young girl despite her age—as an elf, she was far older than anyone else in the room, and her breasts were voluptuous. It was only because of her appearance and innocent demeanor that the others treated her as if she were younger.
"Uh, um…I would like to volunteer!" she said.

Nicks knitted his brows. “I realize what a hard worker Miss Yumeria is, but we’re talking about sending someone to monitor Leon here. I don’t know that she’s really up to the task—ouch!”
Luce whacked him over the head, whispering, “You idiot. Her son is currently in Alzer, right? She’s always so worried about him. Part of the reason we’d send her would be to look after Leon, but part of it would be to let her visit her child.”
Realization dawned on Nicks’s face. Luce was obviously referring to Kyle—Yumeria’s only son. He was currently serving Marie, so the two of them were living apart.
“Oh, so that’s what this is about. Okay, I understand. Then let’s do it. We’ll send Miss Yumeria along in Leon’s ship.”
Balcus nodded.
They meant well; the three of them only wanted to give Yumeria a chance to work somewhere that would let her spend time with her child.
Alas, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

***

Before returning to Alzer, we stopped back by my parents’ place. That was where I parted ways with Angie and Livia. It was time to return to my life studying abroad.
“Man, I wasted my whole summer break chatting about relationship stuff.”
I’d thought I’d be able to spend my time leisurely once we got back to Holfort, but instead I had spent days upon days discussing our plans for the future.
Luxion scoffed. “Master, given your position, were you truly naive enough to think you could merely enjoy your break? Holfort and Alzer have entered a transitional phase as they try to establish diplomacy, but it only appears peaceful on the surface. I suspect both countries are exceedingly busy. And underlying all of that, this otome game—as you like to call it—is entering its own critical phase, is it not?”
“Yeah, yeah. I get all of that. But sometimes I need a breather too, you know?”
“I believe you have gotten more than a ‘breather.’”
I understood we were in a critical phase, okay? We still needed to find a partner for Noelle. If we didn’t, the whole world would be in danger.
The last boss of the second game is supposed to be Lord Albergue when he pulls the strings of the Sacred Tree, right?
At that point, said tree would become a monster that went berserk.
Ugh, give me a break.
In the worst-case scenario, Luxion could probably deal with the fallout, but the republic would be in dire straits if they lost their tree. It had provided them with the bountiful wealth they currently enjoyed. They would be in a difficult position without it, to say the least.

According to Marie, the sapling was supposed to “rebirth the country anew,” but we didn’t know if that meant it was capable of the same feats as the current Sacred Tree. However, the Sacred Tree Sapling—oh, screw it, that was too much of a mouthful; I’d just call it Sappie for short—needed a Priestess to realize its full potential. Noelle had to become the Priestess *and* choose a Guardian to protect her and Sappie, or we’d hit the game’s bad ending.

That said… I glanced at the back of my right hand. “Anyway, is this mark really not gonna go away? This is the Guardian’s Crest, right? Why did it appear on me?”

It felt like Sappie had recognized me as its Guardian. Normally, the Priestess was the first one a sapling chose, and it was then up to her to select a Guardian.

Luxion, however, had a different take. “Master, do you know why the Sacred Tree chooses a Guardian?”

“Well, if the word itself is any indication, I assume to protect itself.”

“Correct. And who acquired this sapling and protected it up until now?”

“Guess that’d be me.”

“I see nothing odd about the sapling deeming you its rightful Guardian.”

“But what about the Priestess?”

“I never understood that part to begin with. Is it so very necessary for the Priestess to decide who ought to be the Guardian? I see the rationale in the sapling choosing a Priestess first—in order to better its understanding of humans through her—but in this case, the sapling has obviously prioritized its own survival.”

For whatever reason, if Sappie (or any other sapling from the Sacred Tree) was left on its own, it would wither and die. Yanking it out of the ground and keeping close watch over it wouldn’t change the situation either. It simply wouldn’t grow, and the reason for this was most intriguing.

“Even though the Sacred Tree gives life to those saplings, it’s also the one responsible for killing them,” I said.

“Yes, it does seem quite twisted for a plant to operate in such a way.”

The Sacred Tree’s energy source was the mana permeating the air. Unsurprisingly, the nutrients derived from water or soil were insufficient food for these saplings. However, even though it wasn’t like a single sapling could steal much atmospheric mana from its forebear, the Sacred Tree refused to share any of this precious resource with its offspring. It was almost as if it were trying to destroy the saplings.

“For a sapling, the most important thing is to ensure it has a master who will guarantee its continued survival. I have no doubt that a Priestess comes secondary to this.”

“So reality is different from the game,” I surmised. “Anyway, what should we do now? The Priestess and Guardian are supposed to be lovers, right? But I already have two fiancées. Or would it be possible to have either Livia or Angie become the Priestess?”

Luxion swiveled his eye from side to side, as if shaking his head. “They both lack the necessary qualities to become the Priestess.”
“You looked into it?”
“I did. I suspected, depending on how things played out, that it would become vital information.”
While I didn’t disagree that it was vital, something about this rubbed me wrong.
“You could’ve said something to me before you started looking into it,” I said. “Feels weird having you go off on your own like that.”
“Well, I merely did it while I was already conducting my periodic screening. However, something seemed off to me.”
“Everything always seems off to you, but fine. I’ll humor you. What is it?”
“As a general rule, there is a hierarchy to the crests that the Sacred Tree allocates to people. The most powerful is the Guardian’s Crest, and just below that is the Priestess’s Crest.”
“Yeah, okay.”
“Next are the crests given to those who hail from the Six Great Houses. The Sacred Tree prioritizes the protection it offers to those who rank the highest. In that case, something is odd about all of this.”
“What’s that?”
“Have you not noticed?”
I knitted my brows in confusion, which only elicited Luxion’s exasperated sigh.
Wonderful. Now he’s starting to piss me off. I rolled my eyes.“Hurry up and spit it out already!”
“If House Lespinasse had both the Guardian and Priestess crests, then why were they defeated by House Rault when the latter’s crest power should have paled in comparison?”
Now I finally understood what he was getting at. And yeah, he did have a point. Why *had* House Lespinasse fallen? Neither Marie nor Lelia had made any mention of that. They’d simply treated it as a natural part of the game’s lore.
“Maybe House Rault invented some kind of weapon that doesn’t rely on the Sacred Tree’s power?” I guessed.
“The republic doesn’t possess the technology. I do not believe there is any weapon or technique currently in existence that can counter the crests’ power.”
In Alzer, many weapons were powered by energy from the Sacred Tree. The tree would cut its resources off from anyone who opposed the elite, since it prioritized protecting those at the top of its hierarchy. By extension, House Lespinasse should have had the same protection at its disposal. They could have used the tree’s power to fight back. Regardless of whether they were caught unaware in a surprise attack, it didn’t seem possible for them to be overpowered and lose so dramatically. Yet based on what Lelia had said, they had been obliterated without much of a struggle.

“Master, this is only a theory, but what if House Lespinasse lost their crests?”
Now things were getting complicated. If they didn’t have their crests, then perhaps someone had stolen them? Or had they simply lost them somehow? No, maybe…
“Remember how Pierre used the Sacred Tree’s power to do whatever he wanted?” I asked. “Maybe in the same way, House Rault used underhanded methods to pull the rug out from under House Lespinasse.”
“I cannot deny that possibility, but by my reckoning, the chances of that seem exceedingly low. If such a method existed, the other houses should have knowledge of it. Furthermore, another thing seems off to me. Everyone in the republic knows that House Rault was responsible for House Lespinasse’s downfall, yet in spite of his involvement, Albergue continues to occupy the position of assembly chairman.”
Which meant that the other houses, fully aware of the role the Raults had played, still acknowledged their authority. That just made this whole thing even more confusing.
“Luxion, why didn’t you tell me about all of this sooner?”
“I did want to consult with you about this, but the timing was never right. Besides, the discussion was not urgent at the time. It is all history, after all.”
“No, I think this definitely qualifies as urgent!”
“Knowing all this changes nothing, at least not in any significant way. You are trying to reach the end of this otome game, are you not?”
True. Knowing the truth of what had happened before wouldn’t really have much of an impact on our trajectory.
I shook my head. “Still, tell me this stuff! If there’s a reason for the crap that’s gone down, I wanna know!”
There was a possibility we were operating on a misunderstanding…again. That was what had made the last year such a struggle.
“You truly wish to know the specifics? If you empathize any more with the Raults than you already do, you will be the one to suffer for it. Albergue will die by the end, and their house will fall. That’s the conclusion you desire.”
The memory of the meal I had enjoyed at the Rault estate flashed through my mind, and I dropped my gaze.
Luxion’s voice softened. “Master, there is no need for you to shoulder the burdens of a foreign nation. Do not lose sight of that which is most important.”
I slumped down to the floor.
Just what am I supposed to do?

***

The *Einhorn* made its way back toward my family home. As I moped about inside, Livia called over to me.

“Mr. Leon, we’ll be arriving soon.” She had come to check on me, and the loneliness on her face was unmistakable. “We’ll have to part ways for a while again,” she murmured. “Anyway, what’s the matter? You don’t seem very cheerful.”
“Oh, you can tell? To be honest, I don’t really want to go back. Home is where the heart is, and all of that.” I forced a smile, but the serious look in Livia’s eyes made me flinch back.
She lowered her gaze. “Is something…*happening* in the republic?”
“What? Why do you say that?!”
I hadn’t said a word to her about the otome game situation. There was no way she could have realized what I was up to.
Livia lifted her chin and peered at me. “Didn’t you go to the Alzer Republic because something’s happening there?”
“N-no, that’s not it at all. You know, I’m just babysitting Julius and his buddies.” The lie spilled right past my lips, but the truth was that the palace had forced Julius and his gaggle of idiots on me *after* I decided to study abroad.
“Angie told me,” said Livia. “His Highness and the others weren’t pushed off on you until after you elected to go. There *is* something you’re hiding from us, isn’t there?”
I turned my face away. Things would have been so much easier if I could just admit, “Yep, I was originally from a different world and reincarnated here. This world is actually an otome game, and you are the original protagonist.”
Were anyone stupid enough to actually say such a thing, I’d give them a wide berth.
Livia wasn’t angered by my silence. Instead, she said, “I have no idea what you’re up to, but I’m sure it must be something important.”
“Livia?”
“You’re a kind person.” Livia smiled at me, and the load on my shoulders suddenly seemed a lot lighter. “I suspect there’s something that you feel you can’t tell us, so I have just one favor to ask: Please don’t overdo it.”
I hesitated over how to respond, but before I could, she gently wrapped her arms around me.
“Angie and I will keep working hard, so that one day, you’ll feel like you can rely upon us. I hope you can hold out until then.”
“I don’t know what to say…”
I was touched by the embrace, but all of a sudden, Livia’s grip tightened.
“And one more thing… Angie may not admit as much, but she’s sensitive when it comes to cheating.”
“Huh? Uh, yeah. Okay.”
That was a bit awkward to hear. Especially since I had *not* cheated.
“Angie is worried,” Livia continued. “So please don’t do anything to make her sad.”
“I know. I won’t.”

It was Marie's fault that cheating was such a sore topic for Angie. My living in close proximity to the former must have made it that much more difficult for Angie to rest easy.

I should have been more cognizant of that.

Livia pulled away, smiling. "We'll come visit again during the next long break. Let's be sure to take our time and enjoy some sightseeing then."

"You can leave it to me—I'll research all the good spots," I said, thumping my chest.

"I'm looking forward to it."

***

Angie and Cordelia were at that moment in a different room aboard the *Einhorn*. The former sighed, her expression tight. Her brother's words were the cause of her frustration.

"'Be accommodating' and 'Let it slide if he takes a lover or two,' huh?"

Angie had indeed been anxious since she heard Leon had been staying with Marie, so she had mentioned wanting to send someone to keep an eye on him. Both her father and brother agreed the situation was concerning, and they had approved the idea of sending someone from the Redgrave estate.

At the same time, her older brother Gilbert had said, "While I agree that Marie is bad news, I don't think you should quibble about it if he gets involved with another woman."

Like Leon, her father and brother were both men. They could justify a man "making a mistake" and cheating. Despite that, they did agree to warn Leon against such behavior—but for his part, Leon seemed oblivious.

As the daughter of an aristocrat, Angie had been raised on the idea that a husband having a lover was nothing to fuss over, but her heart sank at the thought of actually experiencing it.

"Maybe I shouldn't have brought it up with them?" Angie said out loud. The question was directed toward Cordelia. She often looked after Angie, and she was a fine maid to boot, with a respectable education.

"As a noble, I see nothing wrong with you consulting them, but as a person—as a woman—I think you are justified in disliking their response."

Angie was discussing this with Cordelia partly because the latter was to be sent with Leon to the republic. Her father and brother had wanted to send a young and beautiful woman, since if Leon happened to dally with her, it would cause fewer issues for their house.

Angie eyed Cordelia. "Anyway, I never thought you would volunteer for the job."

When they'd come up with the plan, they had gathered all the maids in the house who fit the bill, at which point Cordelia stepped forward to take on the role.

"Lady Angelica, I will not let you down. I swear I will keep a strict eye on Earl Bartfort."

“A-all right.”
Cordelia’s passion about fulfilling her assignment put Angie at ease.
I was kind of hoping to have someone investigate Leon, but I never dreamed Cordelia would be this eager. Angie trusted Cordelia, so she certainly wasn’t a bad choice for sending to keep an eye on her fiancé. “Honestly, it’s not as if I want to tie him down. I’m willing to overlook some level of infidelity.”
“Are you certain?”
“Yes. As long as he comes back home to us, I won’t ask any more than that.” Honestly, Angie really didn’t want him to cheat at all, but she was terrified he’d hate her if she was too possessive. Even so… “But be especially wary of Marie. She managed to ensnare His Highness and his friends in a matter of weeks. There is the slim chance that Leon might fall into her clutches… I don’t actually think that will happen, but I can’t help but worry.”
If there was anyone Angie didn’t trust, it was that girl.
Cordelia put a hand over her heart. “Understood.”

***

Upon returning home, my parents requested I take someone with me—our elven servant, Miss Yumeria. She stood before me with an enormous travel bag in her hands and a nervous expression on her face.
“What? You want me to take Miss Yumeria?” I asked.
“Pl-pleasure to be joining yoof… Oh, I bit my tongue.” Yumeria’s eyes welled with tears, mortified by her literal slip of the tongue.
Or maybe she bit her tongue too hard and it’s just that painful.
Whatever the reason, she was a cute companion—even if she was older than me and had a son already.
“She’s going to keep an eye on you,” my mother said. “And if you dare cheat, it’s got nothing to do with us.”
My family sure didn’t have much faith in me.
“Oh, come on. I’m not going to cheat. I’m already engaged, you know.”
“Which is precisely the problem, isn’t it? You better not do anything to make those girls cry.”
“Yeah, yeah. I know.”
My mother pulled a face as if unconvinced.
“Well, it’s true that we’re partly sending her to watch you,” Father admitted. “But you see, she’s been working really hard. We figured this would be a nice reward for her.”
“Reward?” I quirked a brow at first, but then the realization hit me. “Ah, I get it.”
Kyle was in the Alzer Republic, which meant my parents were hoping to reunite Miss Yumeria with him.
“Okay. Gotcha,” I said.

“Do you *really* understand?” Father folded his arms. “We weren’t lying when we said she’ll be keeping an eye on you.”
“Seriously? So you don’t trust me either?!”
“Nope.”
He didn’t even hesitate. I trembled from the shock and turned to Nicks, who had been silent this entire time. He smiled teasingly at me.
“After Miss Clarice and Miss Deirdre, did you honestly expect us *not* to doubt you? Don’t you have a brain in that head of yours? Oh, how I envy you. I’m not even that intimate with a single girl, let alone a whole harem of them.”
The moment he whipped out those names, there was nothing I could say in my defense.
It’s true. We did exchange letters. But did that really qualify as cheating?
“Hold on a sec,” I said. “I heard that these days, in the kingdom, a guy doesn’t have to say anything and women still flock to him.”
“Yeah, well, if it wasn’t already obvious enough, you being my brother complicates things.” Nicks pressed his palm to his face, frowning.

***

Right as we were about to take off, Angie suddenly introduced me to her maid.
“My name is Cordelia Fou Easton. You may simply call me Cordelia, if it pleases you, my lord.”
Her greeting was polite enough, but I sensed she had her guard high up.
“Earl Bartfort,” Miss Yumeria gasped, her face lighting up. “She’s a real maid! How incredible!”
“You’re a real maid too, you know. Although, I do agree she seems to be very professional.”
Cordelia’s every movement was graceful, and the fact that she had Fou in her name meant she was of noble birth herself—some aristocrat’s daughter. Given how vast the Redgrave estate was, he had many high-ranking people working under him. Not everyone was of noble birth, of course, but other people like Cordelia were employed there.
“Cordelia has my utmost trust,” said Angie. “She’ll be looking after you in Alzer.”
“Huh? But I already have Miss Yumeria.”
Miss Yumeria raised her hand slightly. “Um, yes. I was also asked to look after him—by his family.”
Livia bit her lip and looked at Angie. “I suppose we should have spoken with our father-in-law beforehand.”
Angie nodded. “However, this still works out perfectly. Two heads are better than one. It can’t hurt to have another pair of hands to help out. A whole dozen might be too much, but there’s nothing wrong with two.”
Miss Cordelia glanced at me. “A pleasure to be in your service, my lord.”

Matching her, Miss Yumeria bowed her head. “Y-yes, it’s a pleasure, my lord!”
“Just call me Leon,” I said. “I’m not used to people calling me ‘lord’ anything.”
Luxion floated toward me, hovering over my right shoulder. It seemed he had finished preparing the *Einhorn* for our trip. “Master, we are ready to depart. There was no trouble loading the cargo either.”
“Gotcha.” I turned back toward Angie and Livia. “Well, guess I’ll be off then.”
Livia folded her arms behind her back, straightened herself, and smiled at me. “Take good care of yourself.”
Angie hesitated over what to say at first, but her expression soon regained its normal confidence. “Have a safe trip. We’ll come see you again on our next long holiday.”
After waving goodbye to the two of them, I escorted Miss Yumeria and Miss Cordelia aboard the *Einhorn*. I was leaving home to return to a country mired in issues, and honestly, I didn’t want to go.

Chapter 6:
Destined Partner

IT WAS QUIET at Marie's estate. Part of that was due to the absence of five rambunctious boys, but it was also due to the gloomy air that had settled over the residents. Marie had hunkered down at her desk to update her accounting ledger. The night had already grown late. Marie planned to retire once she finished, but Carla interrupted her.

"Lady Marie, there's something I want to discuss with you…regarding Miss Noelle."

"Did something happen?"

"We've had no issue with settling her in, since she just stayed with us, but—I don't know how to put this—it seems like she's putting up a brave front. Sometimes, she's outright depressed."

Marie had only been able to rescue Noelle the other day because Cleare had been keeping an eye on the girl. Cleare alerted Marie the moment Loic made his move, which allowed her to make it in time to protect Noelle, but their protagonist had been in a strange mood ever since.

"I see," said Marie. "Well, I'll take care of her, so you get some rest."

"A-all right."

After dismissing Carla, Marie put down her pen and cradled her head, slumping over her desk. "Idiot of a brother. What are you gonna do about this mess?"

The Priestess's Crest had appeared on the back of Noelle's right hand, but Leon had left for the kingdom before they could inform him. Luxion's main body had left as well, which made it impossible to communicate the situation. Leon was supposed to return soon, so Marie intended to inform him when he did. She at least felt like she could relax a bit for now, since Cleare was on hand—but the real issue wasn't Noelle's crest so much as Noelle herself.

Why did she have to fall for my brother?! What's even good about him? He has a terrible personality, a potty mouth, average looks, and… Okay, he does make pretty good money, and I can admit he's resourceful. Hang on a minute! Maybe he's actually a pretty good catch.

Once upon a time, Marie wouldn't have given a boy like Leon a second glance considering how underwhelming he was compared to Julius and the other boys, but that was no longer true. Leon had managed to get his hands on Luxion, and he was an earl. He'd also managed to wrest payouts from the republic, so he was even wealthier than before. If you overlooked his personality and crude way of speaking, he was actually prime dating material.

No! The pros aren't the issue here. The issue is still his personality! I sensed she had an interest in Leon a while ago, but he was completely oblivious.

Marie had realized it once the two began staying at her manor. Noelle always seemed hyper-aware of Leon, but he never noticed. Prior to their summer break, Noelle had made open overtures, but Leon hadn't picked up on any of them.

And what was that crap about him hating dense guys? He's the dense one! Dense as a brick.

Leon always complained about how much he hated protagonists who were oblivious to romantic affection, but he didn't realize that he was no different from them.

Marie had hesitated over whether to say anything. She could have told Noelle that Leon was already promised twice over, but seeing the girl so cheerful, she had been unable to bear taking the wind out of her sails. Noelle was such a good girl. She even helped around the house.

It was hard not to like her; she was so upbeat and candid. Honestly, Marie *wanted* to support her. That was why she had been unable to say anything. But that had come back to bite her.

I should have told her sooner.

She was still annoyed at Leon for not picking up on Noelle's feelings.

You're at fault too, you know. Do you have any idea how hard she tried to get you to notice her? Watching you annoyed the hell out of me.

Irritated as Marie was, she knew anger wouldn't solve the problem. She gave up and decided to talk to Noelle, pulling herself out of her chair and starting toward the door.

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Noelle was spacing out in her room when Marie arrived. She forced a smile and welcomed Marie in. Marie took a seat on a chair while Noelle plopped down on her bed.

"It's late. What's up?" Noelle couldn't begin to guess why Marie would visit her at this hour.

"Sorry. I should have told you sooner," said Marie.

It was easy to guess what Marie was getting at. Noelle also wished Marie had mentioned Leon's fiancées earlier, but after averting her eyes, she shook her head. "It's fine. I was the one who got all carried away. I should have known he would already have someone. You know what they say, the good ones are always taken."

Noelle laughed it off, but honestly, she wanted to break down in tears.

Marie's face fell. "What do you even like about him?"

"You're going to ask me that now? Well, no harm in it, I guess. …I liked that he was comfortable to be around. I didn't have to worry about anything when I was with him. I could just be. That was really important to me. I even entertained the idea of going back to Holfort with him."

Noelle was willing to throw it all away—the position of Priestess, her hopes for her house, and even her country.

But in the end, I guess I can't run from the Sacred Tree. It was almost as if those who had once been tied to it could never completely escape its grasp. At least, that was how Noelle felt. She glanced down at her bandaged hand.
"There's a famous story here in the republic. Do you know of it, Rie?"
"What story?"
"We don't have them anymore, but there used to be a Guardian and a Priestess. The Priestess was always selected from the same family, generation after generation."
The head of House Lespinasse was always a woman, because only a woman could inherit the Priestess's Crest.
"But the Guardian's Crest was not heritable. The Priestess always chose the most suitable man she could find each time."
The Priestess was always from a great house of noble blood. The Guardian was the one chosen on merit alone, and it was always the Priestess who selected him.
Marie's shoulders relaxed. "I don't know the specifics, but I think I've heard a bit of this story before."
"Oh, so you know. In that case, I'll get straight to the point. The man the Priestess falls in love with is chosen as the Guardian. It's only when he returns her affections that the crest appears on him. It's a pretty romantic story."
Marie agreed with that, although something nagged at her. "But hasn't the Guardian basically always been someone from the Six Great Houses?"
"Yes. Well, someone powerful is always chosen, and in Alzer, basically the only people with power are those who already have crests. I suppose there's only ever been one exception."
And that had been Noelle's father. He hadn't been of the Six Great Houses, and to top it off, he hadn't even borne a crest at first. Still, her mother had chosen him.
"That's why, no matter how impossible love might seem, a woman still has a chance of seeing her dreams fulfilled, if she becomes the Priestess. That's the legend, anyway."
However, Noelle's love would not bear fruit.
I guess it really was nothing more than a legend, she thought.
"If—hypothetically speaking—I were to bear the Priestess's Crest, do you think Leon would receive the Guardian's Crest?"
Marie solemnly closed her eyes and nodded. "I am sure he would."
"You really think so? If only that were the case." Noelle's heart faltered. She wanted to divulge the secret on her hand to someone—and to enlist their help. The first person that popped into her mind when she had these thoughts was Leon… But she shook her head. "Ugh, having your heart broken really is the pits. Sorry, but I'd like to be alone for a bit so I can work on forgetting all this."
Honestly, right now, she was glad Leon wasn't here.

***

As soon as Marie left Noelle's room, she clutched her head.
Oh, she's got it bad! And is it just me or has she totally forgotten that I was there when she received the Priestess's Crest?! Yeah, okay, it would've been weird for me to recognize it, but still! Raise your guard a bit, girl!
Marie and Noelle had lived together for a while now, but Noelle had never before given any indication that she was a survivor of House Lespinasse. However, she was making no attempt to hide the crest on her hand. She often glanced at it and sighed to herself.
My brother is such an idiot! Why did you have to make her fall for you?! How are we supposed to fix this?!
Marie cursed him inwardly. Of all the people Noelle could have picked, she had to pick Marie's brother. If only he weren't already engaged, then Marie would have done all she could to support this relationship. Alas, since he already had Angie and Livia, she couldn't.
What should I do? With the way Noelle is now, I don't even know if she can move on.
In the worst-case scenario, it would take her years to get over Leon. The plot wouldn't wait that long—and they'd at the very least graduate from the academy before then. But if things didn't improve, Noelle seemed likely to abandon the idea of ever being with anyone at all.
A man—I need to introduce her to a man! No, that's not going to work. I can't see that going remotely well. Rats! What am I supposed to do?!

***

Loic had been invited to the Druille Estate to continue discussions.
Fernand's face hardened. "You want to disqualify the Raults from the position of chairman? Loic, you have some extreme ideas."
"You think so?"
This was all part of Loic's focused strategy to get his hands on Noelle. The one person he thought might get in his way wasn't Albergue but rather Louise. She often picked fights with Noelle, and these usually thwarted Loic's advances. Additionally, if he wanted to convince his father to approve of his union with Noelle, he needed to remove the Raults from their current position.
Fernand's sharp gaze bored into Loic. "Our house owes the Raults a great debt. When I became the head of my house at a young age, it was Lord Albergue who gave me the backing I required."
"I am aware. If I recall correctly, your houses have been closely linked for the past two generations."
"I am pleased you understand, then."
The bloodlines of the Six Great Houses were exceptionally pure, for they believed the only worthy partners also hailed from those houses. This had,

however, resulted in many of them being a bit too closely related. It was primarily for that reason that Louise could not wed Fernand. Hugues had been born by a different mother, one unrelated to the Raults, and so they had been able to agree on an engagement.
Relatedly, Fernand had been selected to be the heir to House Druille from the very beginning, and it was because Hugues respected that decision that the two enjoyed such a close relationship.
Alliances changed with each new generation. Once, the Raults and Druilles had been in conflict. In another period, the Barielles and the Raults had been close. As times changed, loyalties shifted.
Loic was aware of Fernand's obligation to Albergue, but he also knew the young Druille leader's personality.
For as mild-mannered as he appears on the outside, there's no one more patriotic than Fernand. Loic shook his head. "It's because I know of the debt you owe him that I am reaching out to you. Surely you must understand. He's not fit for the position of chairman. His weak stance on Holfort is proof of that."
Fernand's eyes narrowed. "You've oversimplified the problem. Holfort has mass-produced many other ships like the *Einhorn* and has them stationed in their harbor. What could obstinance toward them cost us?"
"That is exactly why we cannot bend. It will only further weaken our position in future diplomatic outreach."
Fernand's deep love for his country meant he also valued the strength it had touted for generations. Admitting that they had lost to Holfort was an insult to his pride. However, as a political administrator, he also had to be realistic. That was precisely the chink in his armor that Loic planned to exploit.
"Holfort is a tough opponent, which is why we need to adopt the appropriate attitude when dealing with them. If you take our future dealings into consideration, Albergue's stance puts us at a marked disadvantage."
Fernand averted his eyes, perhaps thinking the same thing.
Diplomacy was only one of Loic's cards. Now it was time to reveal his ace.
"And you know…I have found the Priestess."
Fernand's head jerked up, eyes going wide as he stared at Loic.
"After the Raults destroyed the Lespinasses, there were two survivors—twin girls named Noelle and Lelia. They're currently attending the academy and have the Sacred Tree Sapling in their possession."
Fernand gaped. "I find it hard to believe Lord Albergue would fail to wipe them all out, but…they really survived, then?"
The Raults had obliterated House Lespinasse. The younger generation knew that much, but they hadn't been told the specifics of what had happened. Those involved were tight-lipped. The current leaders of the Six Great Houses—or rather, the older generation—probably knew more, but they didn't breathe a word of it.

Barielle's previous head had already passed away, and the same went for the Druille's. There was no way to dig up the truth within their own houses. Intruding on another house's affairs to wrest answers from them wouldn't be easy either. Regardless, the fact remained that House Rault occupied the chairman's position, and many among the younger generation found that odd. Loic found it especially curious.

I find it difficult to believe that Lord Albergue would somehow overlook Noelle and her sister, but perhaps there was some reason for sparing them?

Albergue wasn't the type to leave a liability behind, not if he wanted to wipe out his enemies. Letting even one person go meant failure to someone like him. Regardless, Loic wasn't too interested in the truth. All he cared about was one thing…

"Noelle was chosen as Priestess," he said. "Fernand, I would like to welcome her into my house."

Fernand shot him a cold look. "If she survived and was chosen as Priestess, our houses should secure her safety. No single house should monopolize her." He didn't want House Barielle to wield all of that power themselves.

Thankfully, Loic had prepared adequate compensation. "About Hugues… Do you intend to have him assist you in your work after he graduates?"

Fernand eyed Loic suspiciously, wary of the sudden change of topic, but he nodded. "That was my plan, yes."

"Though he can be a bit unprofessional at times, Hugues is a capable man. He is more than qualified to be the leader of a great house."

If Fernand was guarded before, he was even more so now. "Are you threatening to replace me with him if I refuse to cooperate with you?"

"I wouldn't dream of it. Alzer needs you if she is to remain strong in the future. No one is more qualified to lead House Druille than you. But having said that, Hugues wouldn't make for a bad leader, would he? After all, he is engaged to Louise."

Fernand swiftly picked up on the implied meaning—that Hugues might become the head of House Rault. "Impossible," he said. "They have Serge."

Loic scoffed. "The boy who so desperately wants to be an adventurer? Do you truly think him fit to lead? Besides, he hates the Six Great Houses. Surely you would prefer to have friendly relations with the next head of House Rault."

It would be especially convenient for Fernand if that head were his beloved half-brother. Hugues was capable enough, but he was also obsessed with his brother. The latter seemed to realize that as well.

Loic continued. "Hugues and Louise could lead the family, and no one would complain if their child were to be named heir. No one save the current chairman, that is."

Fernand contemplated this briefly, then finally said, "Very well, Loic. I will accept your deal. However, once the Priestess graduates and is able to stand independently in society, she must become our new chairman. Can you promise to let House Lespinasse sit on that seat once more?"

Loic had no interest in any of that. He must be wary of House Barielle having despotic ambitions. Well, my house will inevitably throw its weight behind hers, whether Fernand likes it or not. Of course, that's something to worry about in the future.

"Of course," said Loic. "Regardless, I will be backing Noelle in the future—as the Guardian."

In the past, the house that produced the Guardian had often enjoyed an increase in authority. There was nothing unusual about that, even if Fernand had made clear that he didn't want House Barielle to monopolize the Priestess. Judging by the pained look on his face, he was also feeling guilty for his decision to betray Albergue. That meant nothing to Loic.

Any obligation he felt was obviously superficial. The moment he realized he could have the Raults' power for himself, he turned on them. No matter. I will make good use of you, Fernand.

***

The Druilles had prepared a room for Louise at their estate, where she was spending her summer vacation. The official reason for her stay was so that she and Hugues could cultivate their relationship before the official wedding ceremony, but their marriage was practically a foregone conclusion. This was only a formality they were paying to the other houses. House Rault had agreed to this union primarily because they were eager to establish a connection between themselves and House Druille. Since Albergue was the current assembly chairman, he would have been in a weak position without any allies.

Even so, Hugues never visited Louise's room. Summer break lasted over a month in Alzer, but he never showed his face even once during that time. Louise was gazing out the window when she noticed Hugues hop into his car and drive off.

"Out to play with other girls again?" she murmured to herself.

Louise couldn't fault him for it. She was perfectly aware of their mutual lack of affection. If anything, she wanted him to make a move on her so they could get it over with more quickly.

Sitting around in her room wasn't going to make the time pass any faster, so she decided to venture out to do some shopping. A number of servants were waiting for her the moment she stepped out of her door.

"Lady Louise, where are you going?"

They looked panicked by her presence.

"I thought I might do some shopping. Could I trouble you to prepare a car for me?"

They traded looks before one said, "Very well. Please wait in your room until we have one ready for you."

"Since you'll be pulling it around to the front anyway, I will simply wait there."

“No, please wait in your room.”
Louise was shooed back inside, which left her suspicious.
What could be going on? The mood in the house is completely different today than it was yesterday.
It gave her the sense they were trying to hide something from her.

***

Louise was supposed to have dinner that evening with Hugues, but the minutes trickled by without him ever showing up. The staff serving her also seemed troubled by his absence.
“He still hasn’t come back?” she asked.
One of them answered, “He has, but Lord Fernand summoned him.”
“Fernand did?”
It was unusual for him to call for his brother before mealtime. In fact, Fernand should have been scolding Hugues for not paying more attention to Louise. Was there some urgent affair distracting him? As Louise contemplated the possibilities, Hugues finally stepped into the room. He waltzed over to the table, throwing himself into his chair and snatching a bottle of wine from one of the nearby servants. He wasted no time pouring it into a glass and chugging it down.
“Such poor manners,” Louise scolded.
Hugues grinned, which made her even more suspicious. Normally, he blew her off without any interest in her nitpicking, only affording her an obligatory, “Yeah, yeah.” But not this time.
“What’s gotten into you?” she asked.
“Louise, something really interesting is about to go down.” After saying that, Hugues dug into the food the servants had carried in.
Louise had no idea what he could be referring to.
Hugues raised his glass, amusement dancing in his eyes. “Tomorrow will be a fine day for our country.”

***

A great number of vehicles pulled up in front of Marie’s estate. Dozens of soldiers arrived as well, all in their dress uniforms. Behind them were other military personnel, decked out in armor. Airships dotted the skies above. The place was completely surrounded.
Kyle pointed a finger at the window. “Mistress, there are other airships gathering too.”
They all flew flags from different houses. One could be forgiven for thinking this was a military operation.
Carla trembled. “Lady Marie, there are Armors zooming around too!”
They were blocked on all sides. The early morning hour had done nothing to discourage the clamor.

Marie was clad in her pajamas. Having shot out of bed thanks to the racket, she was still carrying her pillow in her arms. “Just calm down, everyone,” she said. “First, we need to pinch our cheeks to make sure this isn’t a dream!”
The three of them pinched their cheeks. The pain was proof that this was reality.
Kyle held his head in his hands. “What are we going to do?! The earl is still in Holfort!”
“Waaah, Earl Bartfort, hurry back to us!” Carla wailed.
Neither of them had any hope that the five idiots might be of any help. Frankly, neither did Marie.
“Cleare, is Leon still not back yet?!”
“Weeell, I got a message saying he would be back soon, but it’s still going to be a bit. No worries. I’ll just launch the *Licorne* and barbecue those suckers!”
Marie was horrified.
The fact that these robots are willing to massacre people on a dime is no joke! And anyway, wouldn’t that be a huge problem? Like, diplomatically? Well, hold on, we’re already in hot water as it is. Why the heck do they gotta pull a fast one on us when my brother isn’t here?! Wait! Maybe that’s the point. They’re attacking because he’s not here. Oh, Big Brother, you stupid idiot!
While Marie batted the possibilities around in her mind, a man in a tailcoat approached the house.
“Oh, is this their way of declaring war?” Cleare wondered. “Do they think the *Licorne* less capable than the *Einhorn*? In that case, time to take her for a spin! I’ll prove how capable my baby really is! I’ll fill them with holes ’til they look like Swiss cheese. They won’t know what hit ’em!”
Marie restrained the robot with her pillow. “You moron! If you do that, it really will be a full-blown war! Anyway, we need to let that person in.”
As she raced to the front door, the voice of the official standing outside rang out.
“I come to you as a servant of House Barielle. We have been sent to retrieve Lady Noelle Zel Lespinasse!”
Marie’s eyes went round. “H-how do they know her real name?”
This had never happened in the game—not as far as Marie knew, anyway!

***

Having been summoned, Noelle stepped outside. When she did, the official took a knee and bowed his head. Judging by the crest on his hand, he was one of the higher-ranking retainers of House Barielle.
“It is a relief to see you in good health. We are all extremely pleased to welcome you as the next head of House Lespinasse.”

Gobsmacked, Noelle could only stare. The whole estate was surrounded by soldiers from House Barielle. Onlookers had also gathered for a glimpse at what all the fuss was about, and their eyes were glued on her.
“He said Lespinasse!”
“There were survivors?”
“Wait, but if she’s the heir…that must mean she’s the Priestess!”
The soldiers were quick to shoo off the crowd, but it was too late. They already knew that Noelle was a survivor of House Lespinasse.
Oh boy, now everything is a mess.
Noelle stared down at her right hand. After a pause, she finally said, “You and your people sure have caused a scene. What are you planning to do with so many soldiers?”
“We came intending to put our lives on the line in order to take you back. Even if it means drawing steel on kingdom soldiers to return you to your people, we are prepared to do so.”
Noelle dropped her gaze. He says that even though they know Leon isn’t here.
As she hovered there, a young man approached from the front gate—Loic.
“Noelle, I have come to take you back.”
“Loic, you…”
He glanced around at his family’s army. They weren’t aiming their cannons at Marie’s manor, but they were still fully prepared to go on the offensive at a moment’s notice.
“Do you honestly intend to follow the Feivels’ example and pick a fight with these people?!” Noelle demanded. “Have you forgotten how it ended for them? This is exactly why everyone thinks our country is uncivilized—because people like you do things like this!”
Loic smiled as he listened quietly. It was discomforting. Terrified as Noelle was of his silence, he soon lifted both hands out wide and declared, “I do it only because you’re too valuable *not* to!”
“Come again?”
“Even if the Holfortians wipe us out, we would still be willing to throw our lives away to save you. That doesn’t just go for House Barielle. The other five houses would be forced to fight as well. No, the entire country desires your power such that they would all raise arms in your name!”
The Priestess was important enough to Alzer to motivate every last person to fight for her. It had been over a decade since someone last held the position, and many were anxious over her absence. That was as true for the nobility as it was for the common people. The Priestess acted as a link between the people and the Sacred Tree. Given their reverence for said tree, her existence was most precious. If it meant taking her back, all too many of them would lay down their lives to fight even a man as powerful as Leon.
He’s using the people’s lives as a shield, Noelle realized.

That was Loic's aim. If it came to war, many would be sacrificed. He knew Noelle would be unable to bear seeing that happen, and he was using that weakness against her.
"We will fight to the very last man for you, Noelle. But what about you? Would you ignore our feelings—or rather, would you spurn the hand I offer you, knowing that?"
Frantic footsteps echoed behind Noelle as Marie and her companions scrambled out of the house. Marie had managed to change her clothes, but she'd done so in such a hurry that her hair was still a rat's nest.
The moment Marie spotted Loic, she snapped, "You rotten bastard! Don't you know the difference between right and wrong?! My Bro—I mean, Leon may not be here right now, but that's no excuse for you to get ahead of yourself!"
Loic took one look at her and snorted with laughter. "Oh, how utterly terrifying. I do believe your white *Einhorn* is stationed in the harbor, yes? No doubt it will manage to move on its own and take us down one after another. But even should only one man be left standing on our side, he will continue to fight to his dying breath—because Noelle is Alzer's Priestess."
Noelle's face paled. The mere thought of thousands dying for her had her legs trembling in fear.
Loic stepped closer, bringing his lips to her ear. "Noelle, submit yourself to me. That's your destiny."
"D-destiny?" she stammered.
"That's right. Now that you have been selected as the Priestess, there are only two paths open to you: Run and be responsible for the deaths of thousands, or come obediently to my side and maintain peace for our republic. Go on, make your choice."
Whatever he said, that was no choice. Noelle had only one option left to her.
"You really are the lowest of the low," she said.
"You see, I am in love with you, and I will do anything to have you. Do you now comprehend the depths of my affections?"
Noelle lifted her hand to strike him, but almost as quickly, her arm lost strength and fell.
Behind her, Marie shouted, "Noelle, don't let this slimeball persuade you! Leon will be back before you know it and fix everything!"
"Leon… Earl Bartfort, you mean?" Loic asked. "Yes, he does seem to be quite powerful. But I wonder, how willing *is* he to fight for you? The man is a foreigner. I see no reason for him to involve himself in our domestic affairs. Well, he *is* welcome to try it if he likes."
Would Leon put his life on the line to fight for Noelle…?
No. No, he wouldn't. He had his own position to think about and two fiancées waiting back home. Leon wouldn't fight Loic simply to save some girl.
Moreover, even on the off chance he was willing, Noelle didn't want to drag him into this battle.

I can’t cause him any more trouble than I already have.
Noelle glanced over her shoulder. “Sorry, Rie, but…I’m going to go with him.”
Marie’s jaw dropped in disbelief.
As Noelle started forward, Loic fell into step beside her. He snaked an arm around her waist and forcefully yanked her against him.
“I knew you would answer your people’s fervent wish,” he said. “Come, we must let the whole republic know that a new Priestess has been chosen! Finally, tranquility will be restored!”
The crowd cheered as they watched the two walk together.
Unlike everyone else, Noelle was staring down at her feet.
I’m the only one that needs to be sacrificed. As long as I put up with this, everyone else can be happy. I’m sorry, Lelia, for not hiding my crest better.
As Noelle slipped into the car that Loic had prepared for her, she silently apologized to her twin.

Chapter 7:
Collar

A MAN ARRIVED at Lelia and Noelle's apartment—a professor, to be precise—named Clement. He was a tall, extremely muscular man sporting makeup and a T-shirt tight enough to show the outlines of his muscles. For as masculine as he appeared, his manner of speaking was extremely feminine. Though he wore the guise of a normal teacher, he was actually a knight in service to House Lespinasse. He had used his position at the academy to watch over the girls from a safe distance. The only reason they had been able to enroll there to begin with was thanks to the efforts of former Lespinasse retainers.

"Lady Lelia, I am afraid Lady Noelle has been taken into the Barielles' custody." Clement's voice was solemn, and his face had drained of all color. Lelia wasn't panicked by the news, if only because she'd gotten word already. "I see."

"You're not surprised?"

Normally, Clement spoke more effeminately, but since this was a serious conversation, he had dropped the act entirely. It felt a bit off to Lelia, but this wasn't the kind of situation where she could comment on such things.

In truth, Lelia was completely calm on the inside, despite the abruptness of the situation. Seeing as how Loic changed his ways, I'm sure my sister will be more willing to accept him now. Besides, if things go according to plan, he's supposed to end up the Guardian anyway.

Noelle's partner wasn't supposed to be Leon, but Loic. That was the correct story route.

"I know you and the others have tried to protect us," said Lelia. "Considering we had no troubles enrolling, that was pretty obvious. And I know how much you personally looked out for us, Professor Clement."

Clement dropped to one knee. He had regularly watched over the twins. That had included coming to check in on them at their apartment, as well as covering for them at the academy. "So you already knew?" he asked.

"It was hard not to once I really thought about it, but my sister still hasn't noticed."

"I am sure she hasn't." Clement could surmise that, based on his interactions with her, Noelle was still none the wiser.

Lelia had only figured it out because she had previous knowledge of the game. In it, the protagonist was a descendant of House Lespinasse, one of the (formerly) Seven Great Houses, and even after the fall of her family, she still had the support of their retainers.

"Still, I didn't expect Lady Noelle to be chosen as the Priestess," said Clement.

“You didn’t? Why not?” Lelia tilted her head. “Mother and Father told me that I didn’t have the qualifications, so it could only ever have been her.”
Clement furrowed his brows. “Oh, no… I merely thought you were the more likely candidate to be chosen. I knew nothing about these qualifications. Though I was a knight to your family, I was of lower rank.”
Lelia sighed. “Well, now you know she’s the Priestess. So what are you and the others going to do?”
“Your safety is the bigger priority. We have no way of knowing how House Barielle will choose to act next. We should take our leave from this place immediately.”
It seemed he intended to look after Lelia, but she wasn’t as panicked as he was. After all, she had known it would happen. “It’s fine,” she said. “Emile will be coming to get me.”
“What?”
Noise broke out outside. Clement peered through the window to see a number of cars with the Pleven crest on them. Knights wearing their dress uniforms accompanied Emile, who was clad in a suit.
“Emile?” Clement muttered before spinning to face Lelia.
“Would you like to come along as well?” Lelia asked. “Emile and his family will be looking after me.”
However, in order to update the others serving her house on the new situation, there was much she still needed to discuss with Clement. Regardless, now that they had arrived at this turning point, Lelia finally felt at peace, certain that the scenario was proceeding apace.

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Marie was in a panic.
Aaaaaah! I can’t believe I let Loic steal Noelle while my brother was away. He’s gonna have my head for this, I just know it!
She had never dreamed that Loic would pull such a bold move as to snatch Noelle away in broad daylight. It would have been difficult for her to put up much resistance against him, given the circumstances.
Marie cradled her head in her hands and groaned.
“You’re like an endless supply of entertainment, Rie. I absolutely adore you,” said Cleare.
“Yeah, what an honor,” Marie grumbled sarcastically. “Anyway, why didn’t you inform me of this sooner?! If I had known Loic was going to come storming in, I would have grabbed Noelle and made a run for it!”
“I’m sure he sent people down to the harbor to head us off in case we tried that. I did notice an increase in security ships keeping an eye on the *Licorne* lately. But who could have guessed that was the first step in his maniacal plan.”

“If you knew that much, you should have told me! If my brother is furious with me, are you going to kowtow and apologize too? That’s the key question here!”
“Nice self-preservation instinct! But to be honest, I think we would have had no choice but to concede to Loic even if Master had been here.”
“Huh?”
Cleare had been eavesdropping on the conversation between Loic and Noelle. “I’m not just sitting around, y’know. I *am* collecting info. It’s true they chose to strike because Master wasn’t here, but either way, they would have made a move eventually.”
“So I was right! They *did* come here because my brother’s gone!”
“Uh, no, that’s not quite it. Loic’s target was Elle, but the Great Houses have their own aims here. From the looks of it, Barielle is trying to take down Rault.”
“What?” Marie wrinkled her forehead, confused by the sudden switch to Alzerian politics.
“Oh, I love that look on your face—like you’re utterly lost! Okay, well, to dumb it down, Alzer is experiencing political upheaval, which would still have happened even if Master hadn’t left. That said, Loic sure is impressive. He used himself and his men as hostages to coerce Elle.”
When Cleare relayed how Loic had threatened to have every last Alzerian die fighting for Noelle, Marie’s expression soured.
“That’s not the love interest I know from the game.” The Loic who Marie knew was far more charming. This one was downright rotten to the core.
“Master would be repulsed by his attitude as well. Which, Rie, is precisely why you don’t have to worry. In fact, if we really think about it, isn’t this exactly how the scenario was supposed to go? As long as Elle gets with Loic, it’s happily ever after, right? Well, for everyone except her, that is.”
Marie lowered her gaze. “But I want her to be happy too.”
“That’s asking for the impossible. Given our present situation, everyone else’s happiness is contingent on her sacrifice.”
As Marie recalled all the time she’d spent with Noelle, she felt even more miserable for being so powerless.
A carefree voice suddenly echoed from the front entrance. “I’m back! And I brought you all gifts!”
It was Leon.
“Oh, Master’s back!” Cleare chirped. “Maaaster!” She flew off to meet him.
Marie gritted her teeth. Could you have gotten back even five minutes sooner?!

***

When we arrived at Marie’s estate, Miss Cordelia’s eye began twitching. “What is this place, a pigsty? It’s as though no one has done any cleaning at all.” As a maid, she couldn’t hold her tongue.

Kyle had raced down the stairs to greet them, and he quickly retorted. “We should be praised for keeping the place looking this good, considering how few of us there are to look after it. Besides—” He continued haughtily defending himself, his attitude unsurprising given he was still little more than a child.
Miss Yumeria dropped her travel bag and flew toward him, cutting him off. “Kyle!”
“M-Mother?!”
It was a touching reunion that brought tears to the eyes. Even Miss Cordelia had enough sense to read the room and keep her mouth shut.
“Kyle, I actually came to work here so I could look after Earl—I mean, Lord Leon. That means we’ll be able to be together from now on!”
Yumeria smiled, but Kyle wriggled out of her embrace. He wrinkled his nose, the blush on his face extending all the way to the tips of his ears.
“I’m working right now! Besides, why are *you* here? They should have picked someone else.”
His words came as a shock to Yumeria. “Kyle, you don’t want me around?”
Kyle peeked over at me and Miss Cordelia, clearly conscious that they were being watched.
Is this dork going through puberty already or what?
“I-I didn’t say I don’t want you around, but I told you, I’m working! It’s improper to let private affairs affect one’s job!”
Such dedicated professionalism. But since his words left Miss Yumeria utterly dejected, I had to cut in.
“Kyle, I get that you’re getting in touch with your tricky adult hormones and all that, but try being a little nicer to her. No one will think you’re any less dutiful for it. Now go on, give her a big hug.”
Kyle’s cheeks flushed. “You’re still a kid too, you know!”
Moron. This is my second life. Growing up only happens once, and I already did that a long time ago.
“Don’t lump us together,” I huffed. “*I* am an adult.”
“Hah, as if!”
“I must agree with him,” muttered Luxion, floating beside me. “It does feel as though you’re permanently stuck in puberty.”
“Hey!” I snapped. This stupid AI shows no respect for his master.
As our group fussed amongst ourselves, Cleare came flying into the room. “Master, welcome back!”
“Thanks! Any changes while I was gone?”
“Oh, not much,” said Cleare, as casually as if we were discussing the weather. “Just that House Barielle swooped in and stole Elle, but that’s about it. Oh! I see you brought gifts. Rie will be delighted with these sugary snacks.”
“Oh, okay. So not much then,” I mumbled without thinking, until my mind properly digested the information she’d just given me. “Wait a minute, that sounds like a whole lot!” Then I realized how quiet the mansion was. “Uh?

What happened to Julius and the guys? What could they possibly be doing during this kind of emergency?”
Admittedly, they were pretty worthless, but I’d always thought they could at least make use of themselves during a crisis like this.
Marie crept in, a cold sweat pouring down her face.
“Hey, what happened to your little reverse harem?” I demanded.
“I, um, chased them out.”
“You did what?”
“I chased them out!” she bellowed back. “When summer break started, they wouldn’t help around the house, and they took off with our savings! And you know what they used all of that money on? Some useless flower bouquets! Not just one or two, no—enough to fill the whole foyer! Do you have any idea what a pain it was getting rid of them all?”
By the end of her tirade she was mostly mumbling, but at least I got the gist of it.
“Uh, you sure they’re gonna be all right on their own?”
Cleare laughed. “No need to worry. I’m keeping an eye on them. If you’d like, I can show you how well they’re doing later. It’s definitely worth a peek.”
“As long as they’re alive and well, that’s all that matters.”
I understood why Marie might want to throw them out. They could definitely have stood to learn a little more about the outside world. Honestly, what a bunch of worthless losers. Were they really otome game love interests?

***

I retreated to a deserted room with Marie and Cleare so I could get the full story. The topic wasn’t something I wanted the rest of our company to hear.
“And that’s how it went down,” said Cleare. “Loic used Alzerian soldiers as a shield to bully Elle into going with him.”
“He really went that far, huh?”
Noelle being chosen as the Priestess wasn’t unexpected, but the timing was inconvenient. On top of that, Loic’s behavior was way out of bounds. What could be going through his head, using himself and other people as hostages?
“Please don’t blame Rie, okay? I’m sure even if you’d been there, Master, you’d have had no choice but to send Elle off as well,” said Cleare as Marie cowered behind her.
Right now, I was more concerned with thinking up some kind of plan to get us out of this mess. But there was one thing I wanted to say. “If I had been here, I would have stopped Noelle no matter the cost.”
Cleare paused. “But I think Elle would have still gone with him, in any case.”
“Huh?”

Marie was still hiding behind Cleare, which made her difficult to see. Hiding would have been an impossible feat for anyone else, but Marie was petite enough that the tiny, floating robot could easily obscure her. “You big dunce,” she muttered.
“What’s that supposed to mean?” I turned a smile at her, and she squeaked, reeling back.
Luxion shook his red eye from side to side, exasperated by our antics. “Well, Master, what shall we do?” he cut in. “Will we fight the republic? Or shall we allow things to run their course and see where that takes us? It’s entirely up to you.”
“House Barielle plans to marry Loic to Elle,” Cleare informed us; she had been gathering information on the situation. “I suspect they’re aiming for him to be the next Guardian.”
Something about that bothered me. “Hold on a second. The crest on Noelle’s hand—which tree is it from?”
It was probably best to clarify whether the Sacred Tree had chosen her or if Sappie had.
We turned our gazes to Cleare, who giggled. “Eh he he! I figure it’s probably from the sapling, but lacking the necessary data, I can’t say for sure.”
“That’s a pretty important detail, don’t you think?!”
“There is no need to worry,” Luxion interjected. “It was the sapling that chose her.”
Marie’s eyes widened. “What? But how do you know?”
He didn’t respond. Instead, he turned to me. “Master, it’s up to you how we handle this. Strictly speaking, Noelle is currently following the scenario as intended. Are you sure you still wish to involve yourself with her?”
“Are you stupid?” I shook my head. “If he took her against her will, then we’re not actually following the game’s scenario. There’s no happy end if the protagonist is miserable. Instead, our route’s taken a bad turn. We’re gonna get Noelle back. Worst-case scenario, we flee to the kingdom for a while.”
“So you are going to save her after all?”
That bastard Loic was incorrigible. He didn’t deserve Noelle.
Marie opened her mouth to say something before promptly closing it.
“Oh, right, there’s one more thing,” said Cleare. “Louise Rault is engaged to Hugues Druille now. You’re close with her, aren’t you, Master? You sure you don’t want to celebrate their union?”
Seriously? Is it just me or did a bunch of plot points trigger in my absence?

***

“That swine… The moment we returned, he holed himself up in a room with Marie.”

Cordelia had already changed into her maid uniform and was cleaning what she had deemed to be a genuine sty. The moment she learned that Leon and Marie were alone together, she cursed him. Ordinarily, they wouldn't have been allowed to live under the same roof, which was all the more reason why Cordelia viewed their current proximity as a betrayal of her mistress.
She glanced at Yumeria, who was helping her clean. The elf woman was staring absently at a transparent case on the table, which contained a small sapling.
"Miss Yumeria? What is it?"
Yumeria's shoulders jumped. "O-oh, I'm sorry! Um, I just…couldn't help but notice that little one there."
Cordelia peered at the tiny tree. "Yes, it is an odd decoration, considering its lack of flowers. Perhaps it's an Alzerian custom?" She wanted to change it out immediately, but she thought it best to receive the owner's approval first. "I do think it's a bit plain for the table, but it might upset someone if we moved it without asking. I will check with them later."
Cordelia was always exceedingly professional about her work. Yumeria, on the other hand, seemed distracted.
Perhaps she's feeling depressed after her son spurned her earlier. It might be better for her to rest for now. Either way, Cordelia was sure Kyle's cold treatment had something to do with it. "Miss Yumeria, if you're tired, please feel free to rest. I will take care of things here."
"B-but—"
"Go have a talk with your son. Once things get busier, you won't have as much of an opportunity to do so."
"Y-yes, you're right!" Yumeria hurried out of the room.
As soon as she was gone, Cordelia realized… "Drat! If I have to do all the cleaning by myself, I won't be able to investigate that swine!"
Unable to abandon her work, Cordelia scowled in frustration and resumed cleaning.

***

On her way to find Kyle, Yumeria paused in the middle of the hallway and looked around.
"Who's there?"
The corridor was deserted, but she could have sworn someone called out to her. Normally, she would have jumped at the sound, but the voice was just so soothing. When she glanced out the window, she spotted the symbol of the Alzer Republic looming in the distance—the Sacred Tree. It towered almost like a mountain.
Yumeria spaced out as she stared at it. "I wonder what it could be… It's like…" She stepped toward the window, but before she could go any further, someone interrupted her.
"Mother? Shouldn't you be working?" Kyle sighed at her.

Yumeria whipped around. “Oh, um, you see… Someone called out to me!”
“But there’s no one here.”
Yumeria hesitated, unsure of how to respond to that. Finally, her gaze fell to her feet. “I’m sorry.”
“I don’t know what to do with you sometimes.” Kyle shook his head. “Just hurry up and get your cleaning done.”

***

“House Barielle is poised to have Noelle—pardon, the Priestess—marry their heir, Lord Loic, immediately.”
“A wedding already?” Albergue stroked his chin as he listened to his subordinate’s report.
They were moving so quickly. It was hard not to suspect that they had known everything beforehand.
I know Bellange doesn’t like me being the assembly chairman, but does he really intend to steal the position from me like this?
That posed a problem. Albergue needed to think of a countermeasure quickly. “Contact Fernand,” he told his subordinate.
To think that one of the Lespinasse girls who survived would be the next Priestess… I wonder if this is fate?

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Noelle was confined to a room in the Barielle Estate. They claimed to be protecting her, but the door was locked, so she couldn’t have run away even if she’d wanted to. Furthermore, her windows were barred, and someone stood guard at her door around the clock.
Noelle sat on her bed, looking up at Loic who had come to visit her. In his hand, he held a collar from which a chain dangled.
“This will be your wedding band,” he said.
“Is something wrong with your brain?”
“Calm down. Listen. This device is embedded with a part of the Sacred Tree. Normally, a servant wears the collar while their master wears the bracelet attached. That way, the one wearing the collar can’t run away.”
Once the collar and bracelet were both secured in place, the chain disappeared. However, neither servant nor master would be able to venture far from one another. If the one wearing the collar tried to make a run for it, the chain would reappear and forcefully return them to their master’s side. It could also *never* be removed.
“To think such a thing even existed…” Noelle had never heard about it before.
“We have found more ways to make use of the Sacred Tree as of late,” said Loic.

“Hah! Yes, I can see you’re truly doing fascinating new things with the tree. How generous of it, to not steal your crests even though you’re taking advantage of its power.”
Loic stepped toward Noelle, seizing a fistful of her hair as he pressed his face close to hers. “You won’t be able to run from me anymore.”
Noelle glared at him. “Do what you like, but I will *never* love you. Not when you’re willing to sacrifice thousands just for me.”
Loic laughed. “Headstrong as ever, I see. I look forward to seeing how long that lasts. Once we’re married, I’ll show you who’s really on top.”
Noelle’s eyes went round. “M-marriage?! Did you say marriage?!”
“Yes, that’s right—a ceremony that will bind us together forever! It will also be a day of celebration for Alzer, since it will at last have a Priestess *and* a Guardian again.”
Noelle averted her gaze. “The Priestess has to choose the Guardian, and they have to be worthy of the title.”
“Who could be more fit than I? I am the heir of the great House Barielle, and I have more than enough strength with which to protect the Sacred Tree. Not to mention, I *am* in love with you. No one is more qualified.”
Noelle eyed him. “You really are a fool. It was the Sacred Tree *Sapling* that chose me as its Priestess. The current Sacred Tree—which gave you the crest you currently bear—has no interest in me. Too bad for you, Loic.”
Loic grinned. “So what?”
“Huh?”
“I care not whether it’s the Sacred Tree or the Sacred Tree Sapling. It changes nothing. My house merely needs to take it into custody and look after it. Barielle will be leading this country henceforth.”
“But Leon has the sapling—”
“The sapling chooses the Priestess and Guardian. If some outsider tries to take off with it, we will retrieve it by any means necessary—whether by diplomacy or by force. I wonder how much it will take to buy the sapling from him? No, we’ll discuss it with his country instead. No matter the cost, the republic will pay it.”
Loic was confident they would reclaim the sapling, and Noelle had no idea whether Leon and his friends even understood the tree’s true value. It would be worthless to anyone without the Priestess, at any rate. Since Noelle was in the republic’s clutches, Holfort could do nothing with it. It was more likely they would use it as leverage in negotiations, but even if they didn’t, Loic didn’t care. All he wanted was Noelle, and all Bellange wanted was the chairman’s seat.
“Noelle, you can’t escape.” Loic shoved her down on the bed, straddling her—and thrusting the collar around her neck.
“L-Let go of me!”
“Be still!”
His fist found her cheek as she struggled. Noelle stilled, shocked by the impact. Loic used that opportunity to secure the collar in place and then fit

the bracelet on himself. The chain promptly disappeared, just as he'd said it would.
Loic gazed at his bracelet and planted a kiss on it. He remained on top of Noelle, pinning her to the bed. "This is your fault for trying to resist me, Noelle," he murmured to her. "But don't worry. As long as you do what you're told, I'll be nice to you."
Loic's expression relaxed, perhaps finally assured that she couldn't escape him. He reached down and stroked Noelle's red, swelling cheek. "I love you. So please don't anger me. I don't want to hurt you."
A knock sounded on the door, and a voice called from the other side. "Lord Fernand has sent word, my lord."
Loic clicked his tongue before peeling himself away from Noelle and slipping out of the room. She remained splayed across the bed, her arms spread helplessly. When she finally reached up and felt the collar around her neck, tears trickled down her cheeks.

***

If people thought I was the type to go storming in through the front door all the time, they had another thing coming.
"Honestly, creeping in through the back like this fits my personality way better."
We were sneaking onto the Barielle estate where Noelle was being kept. The suit Luxion had prepared for me was practically like a cloaking device, making me almost entirely invisible. I managed to slip right by the guards standing watch—thanks in part to some sweet soundproof shoes.
Luxion had also cloaked himself and was floating beside me as we stealthily made our way in. "Master, I have mapped out the layout, and I have discerned where they are keeping Noelle."
"Awesome. I'll be counting on you to navigate."
"One question: Do you truly intend to escape with her?"
"Yeah? I don't see the problem with it. She's being forced into a marriage she doesn't want." Besides, Loic seemed way too dangerous.
"And what about after you save her?" Luxion asked.
"We take refuge in the kingdom for a while."
"That isn't part of the game's scenario at all."
I shrugged. "We're adapting on the fly."
Some security guards came down the hallway. Not servants either—fully armed soldiers. It made the estate seem far more imposing than it normally would have.
"Even assuming you're able to rescue her, I do not think she will be able to choose a Guardian," said Luxion.
"Why not? She's a girl. I'm sure she'll have no trouble falling in love with someone."
"Because, as of right now, *you* are the Guardian, Master."

“Yeah, well, jury’s out on whether I accept. And while we’re on the subject, can you do something to get rid of this crest?”
True, the sapling had chosen me as its protector, but the order of things was all wrong on a narrative level. Nothing was going the way it was supposed to, and that made me nervous.
“I can, but for a Guardian to be chosen, they must be capable of protecting the Sacred Tree. I still do not believe romance has anything to do with it.”
“Okay, but this is the second installment of that stupid otome game. I don’t think logic applies. I doubt they came up with any specific lore reasons for why things are the way they are.”
The whole point of an otome game was romance. Everything else was secondary. Giving it any more thought than that was a waste of time.
“It is unwise to be so dismissive. Must I remind you that, in the end, there was a *reason* underlying Holfort’s matriarchal society?”
“Yeah, and it was a stupid reason. I was better off not knowing.”
I froze in place as someone passed by. Once they were gone, Luxion motioned for me to continue forward. We overheard a conversation between some of the servants and soldiers, who had let their guard down thinking no one could eavesdrop.
“I heard the Priestess is going to marry the young master.”
“That means Lord Loic will be chosen as the Guardian.”
“House Barielle will be even more powerful than it was before.”
Yeah, I don’t think he’s gonna get picked, actually. Mostly because Noelle hates his guts.
This mansion was enormous, but we finally made it to where Noelle was being kept. Several guards were posted outside.
“There’s two out front and six more in the neighboring rooms on either side,” said Luxion.
“Time to put them all to sleep.”
I slipped a pistol out of my pocket and secured a silencer to the end of it. Since this was a fantasy world, the bullets within weren’t lethal but rather the type that tranquilized whoever they shot.
“We’ll start with the two in front of the door.”
“Please be careful,” said Luxion.
I took aim and shot my rounds.

***

Noelle absently stared up at the ceiling as a thump echoed outside, as if someone had collapsed. The nearby guards must have been alarmed, because there was a scrambling of footsteps, soon followed by raised voices spilling into the hallway.
“Hey, what hap—agh!”
It seemed that whoever took out the first guards did the same to the ones who rushed to the scene.

Noelle lifted herself up into a sitting position. A nervous sweat lined her brow. *Could it be House Rault? Have they come to assassinate me?*
She could still vividly remember that day so many years ago when she escaped their burning mansion—the day House Rault overthrew House Lespinasse. Noelle could only imagine that they had come to kill her, now that they knew she'd survived. As she inwardly panicked over what to do, she heard the other guards collapse one after another.
When the door slowly creaked open, Noelle spun around, looking for anything she could wield as a weapon. Alas, no such item had been left in her vicinity. The man who entered was fully cloaked in black, save for his eyes, but even so, Noelle recognized him.
"Leon?"
She also recognized him by his build, and to top it off, Luxion was floating beside him as well. Noelle couldn't help the instant joy that rose within her at seeing him again.
Leon peeled off his cloth mask and stretched his hand toward her. "Noelle, I came to get you. Let's get outta—hey, what's that collar around your neck?"
"O-oh, this? This is…"
"Whatever, it doesn't matter. You can give me the details later. Right now, we need to run."
Noelle reached out to take his hand but stopped herself, pulling back.
Leon furrowed his brows. "Noelle?"
She was thinking of what Loic had said to her. He had held thousands of lives hostage to get his hands on her. If she were to run away, there was no telling what he might do.
Besides, she couldn't go with Leon for other reasons. *If I did, I would only cause him more trouble.*
Not to mention, he was already engaged to two other girls. Noelle couldn't afford to complicate things for Leon. She didn't want to rely on him. If anything, she wanted to forget him as quickly as possible.
Noelle peered up into his face, her voice trembling. "Go back…"
He gaped at her.
This time, Noelle spoke with more determination. "I said, go back to where you came from! I am Alzer's Priestess. I-I can't be involved with someone like you. I assume it's only passing interest that brought you here, but you shouldn't have bothered. I'm here of my own free will."
It was all lies, but Noelle said them to keep Leon from getting wrapped up in her problems. *If you stay any longer, it will just make me look more pathetic. Hurry up and go.*
It was bad enough that Noelle had fallen for a man who was taken, but she had almost fallen into the trap of letting him rescue her on top of that. She was embarrassed by the thought of relying on him yet again. She didn't want to burden him any more than she already had.
She dropped her gaze. "Go away."

Luxion remained silent as Leon finally shut his gaping mouth and left the way he had entered. Before the door could close, Noelle lifted her face and stretched out her hand. In truth, she wanted him to rescue her. She wanted to scream, “Save me!” at the top of her lungs. But she clamped a hand over her mouth before she could and sank to the floor. The door clicked shut, and tears sprang to her eyes.

This is…this is for the best. I did the right thing. I’m the only one who needs to be sacrificed, and everything else should be fine.

Chapter 8:
The Idiot Brigade Returns

HOUSE BARIELLE was in an uproar. Loic and Bellange were livid upon discovering that the guards posted outside Noelle's room had been tranquilized. It meant an intruder had been allowed to enter.

After draining his glass of alcohol, Bellange slammed it against the table. "If they had managed to get away with kidnapping the Priestess, all of our plans would have been ruined. Who could have done this?!"

House Rault was the most likely suspect as far as Bellange was concerned. He didn't even consider that Holfort might have been behind it.

Loic was likewise panicked. "Noelle won't breathe a word. I tried giving her a harsh scolding, but she stubbornly insists that she has no idea who could be responsible."

"Don't be too rough with the Priestess. Anyway, the guards I had on duty had crests of their own, but they did little to help them resist whoever had broken in. That's troubling."

Loic steepled his fingers in front of his mouth as he ran through the possibilities.

It couldn't be House Rault. If they had made it all the way here, I see no reason why they would have left Noelle alive. Perhaps it was Leon? But he didn't take her with him… Could that have been because of the collar?

Loic's shoulders relaxed. "Maybe that collar I put on her came in handy, and that's why the intruder couldn't make off with her."

Bellange's expression soured. Loic had put that collar on Noelle without consulting anyone else. Bellange had admonished his son for it, but given their present situation, Loic's actions seemed justified. "Putting a collar on the Priestess is completely unheard of."

"The bond Noelle and I share is unique," said Loic.

Bellange shook his head. "You'll never be able to remove it, and you'd better not let anyone see it at the wedding."

"I already specially ordered her dress; it will ensure the collar is hidden from view. There's no need to worry. Oh, relatedly, what about the matter of the Sacred Tree Sapling?"

Bellange averted his gaze. "According to the Holfortian diplomat, it's the earl's personal property. I tried to tempt them into a deal with magic stones, but they insisted they couldn't hand it over—as if they were too terrified to force the earl's hand. They told me I would have to negotiate with him personally if I want it."

"Nothing else matters as long as we get our hands on that sapling. We'll contact one of the Kingdom's higher-ups and coerce them into cooperating. Money is no object, if that's what they're after," said Loic.

There was no need to fight Leon head-on. Since the republic enjoyed incredible energy resources, they were a wealthy nation. They could use that to their advantage and buy technology from Holfort if it came to that. Securing the sapling was of paramount importance to the republic, so even if negotiations failed, Barielle wouldn't be the only house to take up arms. Besides, surely some nobles from Holfort would be tempted by the promise of what the republic had to offer.

One doesn't need to step onto the battlefield in order to kill a hero. After all, heroes have always had a habit of meeting untimely ends. I wonder what yours will be like, Leon?

***

Once Leon returned to Marie's estate, he collapsed onto a sofa. Cordelia shot him a dirty look—one that seemed to indicate he was getting in the way of her cleaning. He simply ignored her. What was worse, he'd switched into his annoying sulky mode.

As his sibling in their past life, Marie could already sense the change. She pressed her hand to her cheek. *Ugh, he's such a pain in the butt.*

Leon was depressed. He'd gone to rescue Noelle only for her to chase him away, and that had come as a huge shock. Despite how bold and impervious he always seemed, he was strangely sensitive when it came to stuff like this. That was precisely why Marie had chosen not to tell him anything until now. She'd known he would throw himself a pity party the moment he learned her feelings. Not that her silence had done much to prevent that; Noelle's rejection must have hit him hard.

Cordelia's icy gaze bored into him. "Lord Leon, please move aside. You are in my way. Besides, a sofa is not for lying down."

Leon waved her off. "Eh, it's fine. Don't worry about it. Consider today a holiday. Go ahead and take it easy."

"While I appreciate your consideration, I already took a break several days ago. I am working today, so please hurry up and move."

It was an insolent attitude for a servant to have, but Leon didn't seem to mind. He slowly sat up and yawned. "Luxion, when's my next meal?"

"There are two more hours until dinner."

"Let's go grab us something to eat. I have a hankering for grilled chicken."

"Please have some patience and wait."

Leon resembled a father loafing about in bed on his day off, with no motivation to do anything.

Marie summoned her courage to speak, even though she knew it would only exasperate her to talk to him in this state. "Hey, Leon, are you sure about leaving Noelle?"

Leon didn't even bother to spare her a glance. "She said she wanted to stay with the Barielles. There's nothing I can do for her now."

"B-but—"

“That was her decision, right? We can’t stick our noses in any more than we already have.”
Ugh, I knew it. He really is a pain when he’s sulking.
Leon had been like this since long ago. But whenever he got like this, he just made the people around him worry more and more.
As Leon yawned again, Yumeria approached, cradling the sapling, which was still snug in its case. “Lord Leon, you, um…have a guest.”
Lelia followed in behind her, dressed in a luxurious outfit.

***

Lelia had only one demand.
“You want us to give you the Sacred Tree Sapling? Do you have any idea what the current situation is?!”
Lelia dropped her gaze. “Yes, I do, but we need that sapling. Loic has mended his ways, and as long as my sister chooses him, the game’s trajectory will be back on track. The sooner we get the sapling to them, the sooner we can solve our remaining issues. So please, hand it over.”
Leon wore a bored look on his face while she pleaded with him.
Marie paid him no mind. “And what’s this solution you’re hinting at?”
Lelia’s face hardened. “We’re going to take down House Rault.”
Leon flinched, but that was the extent of his reaction.
Come on, Big Brother! Get it together! We need you to be your normal self again!
Luxion seemed to pick up on her thoughts. “Now that it’s come to this, Master will spend his time whining while doing absolutely nothing about it for a while. I have seen this pattern before—back when he and Olivia had their disagreement.”
It seemed he’d already pulled this crap before.
“You may have reincarnated, but you haven’t matured at all,” Marie grumbled.
Leon scowled. “Take a look in a mirror. Maybe then you’ll realize which pot’s calling the kettle black.”
“You’re going to turn this around on me? I’m way more mature than you!”
“A mature person would never aim for a reverse-harem ending!”
Leon had a point there. Marie shrank back, unable to offer any defense for herself.
Exasperated by their little display, Lelia cleared her throat. “Ahem, if we can place the sapling where it belongs, then we can finally shine a light on the corruption of House Rault. House Barielle will become the center of power, and they’ll lend us their strength.”
If House Rault were to fall here, that would mean no last boss to defeat. It was a good deal, in that light. Although, even if the last boss did make an appearance, Noelle and Loic were together now, so they could no doubt put an end to it.

But that means the two of them will be permanently linked, right? Marie frowned. "Are you really sure Loic has changed his ways?"
"I spoke with him at the party where Louise and Hugues announced their engagement. He was much calmer and seemed like his old self. He even admitted to his past mistakes."
Did that mean there was a possibility that things might work out? Somehow, Marie was skeptical. After all, she'd seen Loic when he came to retrieve Noelle. If his attitude then was any indication, he hadn't changed at all. Rather, it seemed like Lelia was simply eager to believe he was a different man, regardless of the facts.
I have a bad feeling about this.
Marie's past life experience told her something was off about Loic. He gave her the same vibe as other violent men she'd known, who put on a good facade with their friends while beating their girlfriends behind closed doors.
Leon sighed. "I'm not so sure about that. Noelle was locked in a room, and he'd put a collar around her neck."
Marie shot Lelia a look. "Did you know about this?!"
Lelia gaped. "N-no! I haven't heard anything! I'm sure she must have tried to run away. Knowing her, she probably resisted him."
Marie was growing increasingly convinced that her intuition was on the money.
"Anyway!" Lelia continued, "Let's hurry up and take down House Rault. Once that's done with, we'll have our happy ending. That's the whole reason you guys came to Alzer, right?"
True, the absolute best option was a happy ending. However… *Will Noelle be happy with things the way they are?*
For herself, Marie found no joy in these developments. "But what about my brother having the Guardian's Crest? Can Loic still be chosen by the tree when it's already selected someone else?"
Lelia hesitated. "W-well, isn't there some way you can get rid of it?" She turned to Luxion.
"If Master orders me to do so, I will search for a way to have it removed. However, I will only do so if *Master* commands me."
Lelia shot a look at Leon, but he merely yawned. At a loss, she whispered to Marie, "What's with him? He looks like he doesn't want to do *anything*."
"When he starts sulking, it's the most annoying thing in the world. If you thought he was bad normally, he gets three times worse. He tried to go rescue Noelle, but she turned him away, so he's down in the dumps now."
"Hold on! You didn't tell me anything about that. Don't go off and do things on your own!"
"You have no right to say that!" Marie snapped. "*You* haven't told us anything! If we'd known what was going on, maybe things would have played out differently. And what about your sister having a collar around her neck? Can you confidently say Loic's seen the error of his ways?"
"Well, I…I don't know. I'll go see for myself."

The two glanced at Leon, who hadn't said a word this entire time. It was impossible to tell what was going through his head. Going by his expression, he probably wasn't thinking about anything at all.
Both girls sighed, their shoulders slumping.
What a useless excuse for a brother.

***

I stared out the window as Lelia climbed into one of the Pleven's expensive vehicles and sped away. I wasn't surprised she'd come to ask for the sapling, but I was taken aback when she said it was simply because it'd be convenient to have it at the Priestess's wedding. It seemed the republic still cared about the thing.
More importantly…
"This pretty much means there was no point in us even coming, right? All we did by sticking our noses into things was screw it all up," I said.
"Master, do you truly think Noelle meant what she said to you?"
"What, you think I have any idea what goes on in girls' heads? Sure, we got pretty close, but I was totally caught off guard when she chased me off."
I'd wanted to save her, but she had already made her decision. She didn't need me, did she? At least, that was how it seemed.
"You truly are insufferable," said Luxion.
"What did you just say?" I muttered.
"Nothing." He averted his gaze as Marie marched into the room.
"Big Brother."

***

Yumeria was chatting with the sapling as it sat secure in its case. "Yes, you're right. You need to be somewhere with lots of sunlight. In that case, I'll put you here by the window."
It almost sounded like she was actually conversing with the plant. Kyle felt embarrassed for her as he watched.
"Mother, stop talking to that thing."
"Kyle? But, um… It asked me to put it somewhere with more sunlight."
He sighed. "Plants don't talk. Anyway, have you finished cleaning already?"
"N-not yet…" Yumeria's face fell.
"Mother, we are the employees here," Kyle scolded her as if he were the parent. "Yes, the earl is lenient, so he probably won't notice if we slack on the job, and he's generous, so the pay is great. But only the worst kinds of people would take advantage of that. We need to work to earn our keep."
Yumeria cradled the sapling in her arms. "Y-yes, but—"
"No buts! Now hurry up and get cleaning. We still have to prepare dinner."

As Kyle marched off, Yumeria was left utterly dejected. She stared down at the sapling with a forced smile. “I made him angry again. I wonder if he hates me?”
She started in the direction of the area she was supposed to clean when angry voices boomed through the corridor. She recognized them instantly.
“Cut your crap already!” said Marie. “You know, I’ve been itching to say this to you for a while: Do something about that exhausting personality!”
Leon bellowed back, “Who are you calling exhausting?! Your personality is way more awful than mine! You’ve always, always been—”
“How dare you, you crappy excuse for an older brother!”
Yumeria’s eyes went round. She nearly fumbled and dropped the sapling. As her mind started racing, she gaped.
Wait, what?! What’s going on?! Lady Marie just called Lord Leon her older brother, didn’t she? But the two of them aren’t related at all… What’s all this about?!
Yumeria was so confused it felt like the room was spinning around her.
Wh-what should I do? Does this mean Lord Balcus cheated and he’s actually Lady Marie’s true father?
If the two truly were siblings, the only possibility was that one of their parents had committed adultery. Yumeria could think of no other explanation.
Lady Luce! I have to let her know about this!
Thus began a huge misunderstanding.

***

Marie had waltzed into my room uninvited and started making a nuisance of herself.
How dare she call me exhausting! Even when we lived in Japan, she was always the annoying one.
“You have always been the most insufferable woman!” I snapped.
“And I’m telling you, I’m not half as insufferable as you are! Besides, what’s with you, moping around because Noelle turned you down? Do you really think she meant what she said? Why didn’t you drag her back with you?!”
“I had no choice! She made her decision.”
I was an outsider in the republic. I had no business getting any more involved.
“You big idiot!”
“What’s with you and all this name calling?!”
“I’m only calling you an idiot because that’s what you are! And dense as a brick too!”
“What?! Where do you get off calling me dense?!” I protested. What the hell is her problem? And why is she laying into me so hard?
I glanced over at Luxion, but he showed no signs of stepping in to back me up.

What could I have possibly done wrong?!
Having finally lost her temper, Marie dropped her gaze as she mumbled. "You're the one Noelle fell in love with."
"What?" I stared. You're kidding, right? Why would Noelle fall for me?
My mind spun with doubt, but Marie ignored my struggle. "She's *in love with you*. She was always so happy when she was with you, but you never even noticed."
"W-well… If you knew, you should've said something."
"As if I could say anything!" Marie shrieked. "You think I could really tell her that she needs to give up because you're already promised to two other girls? She was so full of joy when she was with you. And then as soon as your fiancées came to visit, you acted like a lovesick puppy."
I pressed a hand to my cheek, contemplating.
Luxion floated toward me. "It appeared you genuinely had no idea, so I kept it to myself. I suspected you would push yourself unnecessarily if I informed you."
"So you're saying Noelle chose to stay there because she was trying to be considerate toward me?"
"Cleare seems to think so," he said.
Well, shit. I should have brought her back with me, then.
"As of now, House Barielle is even more wary of possible intruders and has increased security. It wouldn't be impossible to extract her, but the enemy will face a number of casualties in the process."
My shoulders sank.
"Big Brother… I want Noelle to be happy. She's a really good person, you know."
"Yeah, I know."
Why were all the protagonists such good people? If Noelle were more human—more detestable—I wouldn't feel so torn up about the situation.
"Loic suspects we were responsible for the intrusion," said Luxion. "He has placed lookouts around this mansion, and he even has people down at the harbor keeping a close watch on the *Einhorn*."
"I screwed up royally. I should have brought her back, even if I had to drag her."
"That would have created issues as well. They have already announced far and wide that the Priestess has been found. If you took her from them, the republic would use any means necessary to retrieve her. Simply put, it would be an international scandal—one of those things you seem to detest so much."
So Loic was already wary of me. Great, so he's annoyingly competent.
Worse yet, an international scandal was beyond my ability to navigate.
"I already caused a stir not too long ago. If I do something this time, I bet Holfort will be on my case."
"It would be a simple thing to instantly eradicate the republic. Shall I move ahead with that plan?"

“You know, you have a bad habit of suggesting country-wide annihilation every time a problem crops up.”
Luxion’s go-to solution was inevitably way too extreme. Moreover, even if we managed to secret Noelle away, suspicion would immediately fall on us. We were in a horrible situation, and I didn’t know squat about politics. Even assuming we managed to take refuge in Holfort, what would the kingdom do if the republic demanded Noelle be handed over?
Maybe we could escape to another country? No, the bigger problem is whether Noelle would even go along with all of this.
And how was I even supposed to face Noelle a second time?
“Things are way more complicated now than they’ve ever been.” I cradled my head in my hands.
“Well, that aside, the boys seem to have returned,” said Luxion. “Although one of them is absent.”
“Huh?” I jerked my chin up.
Marie was already peering out the window. “What the heck am I even looking at?!” she shrieked. “No, no, no! Those boys have some explaining to do!”
Reluctantly, I took a peek as well, but I could never have anticipated what awaited me.

***

As soon as Marie threw open the front door, a voice called out to us.
“Sorry to keep you waiting, Miss Marie.” Jilk was wearing a high-class suit, and several hirelings behind him were carrying wooden boxes. For whatever unfathomable reason, he was hugging a cracked jar to his chest.
“You see, we finally realized what it was you wanted to convey to us.” Brad walked up in a white suit with a silk hat and cape. He was also wearing a monocle and carried a cane, which he pointed toward her. A cheap, artificial flower popped out of the end.
They both looked horribly gaudy in their suits, but if I thought that was bad, I was in for a big surprise.
Greg was clad in a speedo with a bunch of bodybuilders standing behind him, all striking the same pose as him. “Marie, I trained myself into an even better man for you. And as I did, the true meaning of your words finally hit me! Watch, and I’ll show you how much I care about you. Front double biceps!”
It did look as though he’d maybe beefed up a bit more? And he must have slathered oil all over his body, because his skin was glistening.
Just when I thought it couldn’t get any worse, I turned my gaze. *Now this is just beyond human comprehension.*
Chris was wearing a headband, a loincloth, and a happi coat as he sat upon a palanquin, which was being carried by a number of men. “I polished

myself as well, and it helped me realize what you really meant. The five of us were mistaken!"
"Praise be, praise be," chanted the men below him.
The first thing to pop into my head was, Huh, I never realized they had palanquins in this world.
I didn't really want to think about the people carrying it, let alone the idiot riding inside.
The boys kept saying they'd had some big epiphany about what Marie meant, but I was pretty sure they were all grievously mistaken, considering the blank look on her face. No, not just blank—she had gone ghostly pale. As she stood frozen at the entrance to the house, Carla and Kyle began to fuss over her, concerned. Miss Cordelia kept up a poker face the entire time, while Miss Yumeria lit up with delight as she watched.
"Oh, is some kind of festival about to begin?" she asked innocently.
The four boys walked up to Marie, but she was as still and unresponsive as a statue, so I spoke up in her place. "What have you guys been up to?"
"After she chased us out, I began making money by running an antique business," Jilk explained, still holding his weird jar. "And that's when I realized exactly what kind of present would be perfect for Miss Marie."
I glanced at her, but she merely shook her head. It seemed she hadn't run them out because she wanted any kind of gifts. This moron didn't understand her at all.
Brad wasn't any better. "You told us to learn how to make money on our own. In other words, you wanted us to use that money to buy you things. Isn't that right, Marie?"
Well, this is preferable to them squandering Marie's savings, at least. I eyed them. "By the way, how much were you boys able to make?"
Greg struck a pose and flexed his muscles, making them twitch. He had always been something of a beefcake, but after this past month, he was even more so. "Dunno! We splurged every last bit so we could show Marie how much we care for her. Look at this, Marie, my side chest pose!"
Greg continued posing, flaunting his totally ripped bod. The men behind him mimicked along.
Marie's face betrayed no emotion.
Chris climbed down from his palanquin and removed his glasses. He was probably trying to show off, but the whole festival getup just was not working for him. "I spent every last coin I had buying this palanquin and paying for the people necessary to carry it here. But I have no regrets if this demonstrates my feelings for you, Marie."
Well, at least they'd all managed to make some money after she chased them out. I was curious to learn how they'd done it, but the more important thing was that these guys were dumber than a set of color-coordinated doorknobs.
Marie didn't want gifts, she wanted the *money.* The idiot brigade hadn't even tried to understand that, instead interpreting her words however they

saw fit. They had done a good job of making money for once, but it had been a waste once they squandered it on this dumb show.
Brad removed his silk hat, and a bunny promptly popped its head out. He shoved it back in. “D-dummy! It’s not time for you yet!”
“Miss Marie, I ordered even more bouquets for you than last time. They should soon be arriving.” Jilk turned his gaze to the workers around him carrying wooden boxes. “I gathered all the works of art I could find—masterpieces, every last one.”
If the cracked jar in his arms was anything to go by, I wasn’t so sure the rest of the stuff wasn’t also junk. Had he really managed to make it as an antique dealer? He looked like a fraud to me.
I glanced at Marie.
“I didn’t say that. I never said to buy me any gifts,” she muttered.
The boys’ eyes twinkled as they stretched their hands toward her.
“Miss Marie, come, choose me!”
“No, take my hand instead!”
“Marie, take a good look! These muscles are all yours! I’m totally ripped!”
“I swear you will be able to relax with me by your side, Marie! Now please, take my hand!”
The four men in gaudy getups took a knee before Marie as they waited, each hoping she would choose him. Marie remained perfectly still, staring off into the distance. The expression on her face said she had never dreamed the four of them would come back like this. They had managed to misinterpret her words to a truly stunning degree.
Carla glanced around nervously. “I-I’m a little scared to find out what happened to Lord Julius.”
Kyle sighed. “Well, I wouldn’t be surprised if he turned up worse than the rest of them.”
Oh, that’s right. Julius hasn’t come back yet. Knowing him, he’s likely done something even crazier.
Although frankly, I couldn’t even begin to imagine anything worse than what we had already witnessed.
As I began to dread Julius’s return, a strange man appeared. His clothes were a mess, and he wore what looked to be an apron. His white shirt was covered in stains, and he was huffing and puffing as if he’d run the whole way here. In his hand, he clutched a brown envelope.
“Julius!” gasped Marie, realizing who it was.
Seriously?!
I’d anticipated an even grander shock than the other boys had already given us, so it was hard to believe this plain-looking guy in front of us was Julius.
He smiled. “I’m home, Marie.”

Chapter 9:
Former Crown Prince

"I'M HOME."

Having spent about a month away from the estate, Julius was genuinely relieved to see Marie again. He then glanced around at the other boys, who had all prepared lavish presents for her.

How pathetic of me, he thought.

Seeing these amazing gifts, he realized how hopeless he was. He hadn't managed to make very much money at all.

Marie drew closer to him. "Julius, what's with those clothes?" She was clearly worried for him. That, at least, brought a smile to his face.

"I was working at a food stall."

"A food stall?"

Kyle and Carla were standing nearby as well. In fact, those weren't the only familiar faces; Yumeria was here, as well as Angie's servant, Cordelia. He ignored them all and focused on Marie.

"I actually intended to get here first thing, but Chief stocks up on supplies in the mornings, so I was helping him out."

Julius had been working hard since Chief had picked him up off the streets. He hadn't made much money, however, since it was a minimum wage-type job.

"It's a skewer stall," he explained.

"You were working at a skewer stall?" Marie's jaw dropped.

Is she disappointed in me?

Even if she was, this was all Julius had to offer. Plus, he didn't think his time spent working at the food stall had been a waste. He'd truly had fun there, and it had been a struggle every day. He'd poured all of his effort into it and still only managed to earn a pittance, but that had taught him much about the world. While working for Chief, he'd had to listen to drunken customers moan and groan, and Chief had scolded him numerous times for his ignorance. Julius now realized how wrong he had been about many, many things.

"I honestly did want to buy you a present, but I thought this might be the best gift I could give." He held out the envelope containing all the money he'd earned over the past month.

Marie accepted it. The money inside was by no means an impressive sum.

"That was the best I could do," he said. "And I understand now. I really was a fool. I realized one had to work to earn money, but I didn't really comprehend the deeper meaning of that. I suspect that somewhere in the back of my mind I just assumed money would always fall into my hands. Now that I've worked for myself, I finally have a better perspective."

"Julius…" Marie hugged the envelope to her chest.

“It’s not exactly a present, I realize, but it’s the money I worked so hard to earn. I hope you’ll accept it.”
Meanwhile, the other four boys were disappointed.
“Your Highness… I thought you better than this. What a shame.” Jilk shook his head, having had such high expectations of his master.
“I thought you were the one to watch out for in this competition. Guess I was wrong about you.” Brad pulled a face. “To think this is all my rival amounted to…”
“I didn’t want to see you lookin’ this pitiful.” Greg frowned, saddened by this turnout. He’d wanted to have an honest match with his friends, and seeing Julius like this—as if he’d basically forfeited—came as a huge blow.
“I suppose it’s only a competition between the four of us now.” Chris seemed discouraged as well. Like the others, he assumed Julius was out of the running.
Julius understood why they felt that way. “I have no words with which to defend myself. I concede defeat. However, I at least poured everything I had into this path. If this is how things end, I have no choice but to accept it.”
As vexing as it was to lose, Julius knew he could have done no better. He only wished he could have been Marie’s favorite. However, this experience had at least given him a better understanding of his own shortcomings. He couldn’t blame Marie if she chose someone else.
Leon and the others were still staring at him, dumbfounded.
Marie slowly walked up to Julius and took his right wrist, lifting it into the air. “Julius, you are the winner!”
“Huh…?”
The other boys gaped, unable to fathom how the man who had earned the least could be the victor.
“Hold on a moment, Miss Marie! I thought you said you would choose the person who earned the most?” Jilk protested.
Marie fanned herself with the envelope as she stared down the oblivious boys. “Oh? When did I ever say that? I told you to go earn money. What could possess you to then go piddle everything away until you were once more penniless? The four of you came back with nothing, so your score is *nothing*!”
Brad’s shoulders slumped. A dove poked its head out of his pocket.
“No, this can’t be!” Greg fell to his knees. “So we were the ones who had the wrong idea?!”
The men behind him tried to cheer him up. “Please pull yourself together!” they said, and “Your muscles are better than everyone else’s!” and “You were killing it with those poses!”
Chris turned to Julius. “So you were the one who managed to win her heart after all. This time, we are the losers.”
Despite their defeat, the boys looked at peace with the result.

Julius looked around at them, moved. “Everyone… Thank you.” As he wiped away his tears, the boys tried to cheer him up.
Beside them, Marie did a little jig as she brandished the envelope in the air, “Money! We have money!”
Leon watched them all with a blank look. “What the hell did I just witness?”

***

The idiot brigade was back. That was all well and good, but their timing wasn’t the best. They’d been in absentia when Noelle was taken, and I could already tell they weren’t going to be any help in trying to get her back. After all, four of the dumbos who’d been told to go make money had only come back as an antique dealer, a performer, a bodybuilder, and a…festival-goer? Julius, who’d worked at a skewer stall, was easily the most competent-looking of the bunch, but that wasn’t saying much. What was even their purpose for existing? I seriously had to wonder. Regardless, I couldn’t avoid updating them on what had happened in their absence.
Julius was still in his apron as he sat in a chair. After hearing everything I had to say, he folded his arms over his chest in contemplation. “I understand the gist. Basically, Bartfort, you want to save Noelle, yes?”
“You got it.”
I didn’t expect any reliable outcome from this tell-all with Team Bozo, but there was no harm in asking. Although if any of them said or did something truly stupid, I’d be forced to put a stop to it.
“In that case, why not go for it and rescue her?”
I sneered. “Huh? Were you even listening? Noelle’s the Priestess, and the republic needs her, so they’ll try to take her back. Even if we did it covertly and took refuge in the kingdom, we’d still be the number one suspects.”
As I figured, it was a waste of time asking them.
Jilk tilted his head. “And why is that a problem?”
“Uh? Because it’ll be an international scandal?”
Brad shuffled a deck of cards as he listened to the conversation, and he chuckled at my response. “Yes, I’m sure it will… But is that really such a big deal?”
“While I’m positive this is hard for you career troublemakers to grasp, yes. It would be a huge deal.”
Greg, who was still completely naked save for his speedo, shook his head.
Put on some damn clothes, I thought sourly.
“This Sacred Tree Sapling will eventually be able to do the same thing as the Sacred Tree, yeah? In that case, even if it causes some trouble, isn’t it worth holdin’ onto? If it means solvin’ their upcoming energy crisis, I’m sure Holfort would be happy to take in Noelle and the sapling.”
Hold up. Is this half-naked guy in man panties actually talking sense?
Kyle had tried to offer Chris some clothes, but the latter had waved him off, insisting, “This is my style.” Thus, he was still wearing nothing but a

loincloth as he knitted his brows, confused. “I cannot claim to be the most adept at politics, but after hearing this situation in full, I fail to see why you’re worried.”
“I-I already told you…” I was starting to lose confidence in my defense now that all five of the jerk crew had brushed off my concerns.
“Bartfort, I realize you fear you may complicate relations with the republic by doing this, but I see more pros than cons here,” said Julius. “It would be most beneficial to Holfort to secure both the Sacred Tree Sapling and its Priestess, yes? You have good justification to storm in there and take her.”
“You’re all being way too extreme,” I said.
“Not as extreme as you, I would argue. Besides, if you knew all of this beforehand, why didn’t you take her with you and retreat to the kingdom sooner? Holfort was close with House Lespinasse in the past. Even without the Sacred Tree Sapling, I am sure they would have offered her refuge.”
Because this is an otome game and there’s things you don’t know! I couldn’t tell them that, as much as I might have liked to. “Yeah, but…given how things stand, it’s a bit… I mean, no matter the reason, causing an international scandal is intimidating.”
“Enough of your waffling!” Marie snarled. She slammed her foot into my rear end, still brandishing Julius’s envelope in her hand.
“Ouch! What do you think you’re doing, you cavewoman?!”
“Watching you dither pissed me off. If you want to save her, get your butt out there and do it! You’re always waffling around and worrying about things, letting the situation worsen until it’s beyond repair. You’re an eyesore!”
I am not *waffling around!* I protested. “I have responsibilities and stuff!”
“We both know you’re going to end up rescuing her. If you’re just going to throw hands later and make a mess of things anyway, you might as well do it sooner rather than later. Ugh, seriously, you drive me nuts!”
As we bickered, Yumeria nervously glanced between us. Miss Cordelia’s eyes were locked on me, glaring coldly. Meanwhile, the idiot brigade was huddled together and whispering amongst themselves.
“What do you think?”
“I think he’s irredeemable.”
“How to put this… He’s a savage, frankly.”
“Yeah, I gotta agree.”
“Do you really think Bartfort never picked up on it?”
I jabbed a finger in their direction. “You guys! If you’ve got something you wanna say, spit it out already!”
They glanced between themselves before Julius finally said, “In that case, allow me to be candid with you, Bartfort. Did you not realize how Noelle felt for you? Honestly?”
All my bluster faded. “N-no… I didn’t.”
It was the truth. I really hadn’t had a clue until Marie told me. There was nothing I could say in my defense.

“All right, then. Well, I guess that’s just how it is. If you had realized sooner, we might have been able to avoid this situation entirely, but what’s done is done.”
Ugh, he sure does like to drive the knife in deeper. It was true. Things wouldn’t have spun so out of control if I’d figured that out sooner.
“By the way, Bartfort, do you remember when we first dueled?”
“Of course I do. I felt so refreshed afterward.”
My honest reply prompted all the boys to scowl. Alas, I wasn’t in the habit of lying, so if asked, I wasn’t going to hold anything back.
“I see,” said Julius. “Do you remember what you said back then? If I recall correctly, you hammered in how awful I was for playing around when I already had a beautiful fiancée. You scolded me for two-timing.”
That’s right. I did say that. “Yeah, and?”
“Oh, nothing. I simply thought it ironic that now the shoe is on the other foot.”
I clicked my tongue. “Unlike you, I haven’t done any two-timing.”
“I don’t think everyone else would agree with you… But, having said that, I do believe Angelica would forgive you for it.”
“Huh?”
“I’m saying, if you tell Angelica you want Noelle at your side, I think she will allow it. She is the daughter of an aristocratic house. More specifically, she underwent training to be the future queen. I think she would agree that securing Noelle is a matter of national interest.”
“You seriously think I could do such a thing?! Are you guys telling me to cheat?!”
Jilk snorted. “Difficult to believe you’re serious when you already have *two* fiancées.”
Well, shit. I can’t even respond to that.
“Your personal affairs aside,” Julius continued, “the kingdom would not oppose you rescuing Noelle. Plus, my mother gave you leave to act freely while you’re in the republic, yes?”
Yeah, I guess she did give me permission to deal with things here as I see fit. I nodded. “She may have said something along those lines, yeah.”
“Perfect. Then I see no issue at all. Let’s rescue Noelle.”
“Uh, sorry?”
As I gaped, Chris finally chimed in. “Don’t worry. The republic has kept to itself for the past couple of decades. Assuming what they say about the Sacred Tree is true, they can’t invade other countries even if they want to. From what I saw, all their military equipment is purely defensive.”
All of the armaments in the republic were powered by the Sacred Tree’s energy. From an invader’s perspective, Alzer’s might was intimidating, but as soon as they left their borders, their performance fell well below that of Holfort’s.
“They may fuss over it, but they won’t be able to actually do anything,” Chris continued.

I contemplated that for a moment before saying, “But what about the possibility of the republic putting diplomatic pressure on Holfort?”
“Could happen,” said Brad. “But you seem to be forgetting something.”
“What’s that?”
“Based on what you said, this is a domestic power struggle. House Barielle only moved so they could secure power, which means there must be a house that would oppose their ascension, yes?”
“Like House Rault?”
“Precisely. If we want to put up a fight against House Barielle, we just need to team up with the Raults.”
Marie’s shoulders jumped. “Uh, um, but you know… House Rault has kind of a bad reputation, right? I wonder if joining hands with them is really such a great idea.”
I couldn’t blame her for having reservations. They are supposed to be the last boss in the second game, so they’re basically like the villains.
Greg shook his head. “You just don’t get it, Marie. They only look bad from the republic’s perspective. If we look at it from the kingdom’s side, they’re the best house to have leading Alzer. Plus, if we told ’em we wanted to carry Noelle off, they seem like they’d be happy to let us.”
True. House Rault did seem to consider Noelle a problem, so in their point of view, it would do them no harm to send her away. In fact, doing so would obstruct House Barielle’s rise to power.
Jilk grinned deviously. “Yes, it would be of great benefit to the kingdom to establish ties with House Rault, given they head the assembly.”
Julius put a hand on his hip and stared at me. “Well, Bartfort, looks to me like all your concerns have been cleared up.”
“They haven’t been ‘cleared up,’” I snapped. “There’s no way the Raults will agree to work with us.”
“They will if you make them.”
These guys are way more capable than I give them credit for. I guess they did get proper educations when they were heirs of respectable houses. I forgot because they’re normally such morons, but they do have really good grades.
I sighed.
If only you boys could be this clever all of the time!
While I had been busy seeking their advice, Miss Cordelia had managed to disappear and reappear. “Lord Leon,” she said, “you have a guest. A man claiming to be a servant of Lady Louise Rault.”
“Miss Louise sent a servant?”
Julius locked eyes with me. “This is our chance, Bartfort! Do whatever you must to secure her cooperation!”
“Are you all out of your minds?”
“No? We are being quite serious.”
How can you ask the impossible with such a straight face?!

***

Marie and I dressed our best to attend a party that was being held by the Six Great Houses; I sported a suit while Marie wore a gown. Normally, we would never have been invited to such an event, but Miss Louise had personally sent us invitations specifically requesting we meet her here. It seemed she couldn't easily slip away from the Druille estate, in part because people were always watching her. She had noticed something amiss at the estate, however, which was why she had summoned us to her.
Marie was distracted by the extravagant food. "That whole roasted pig looks delicious. I'd love to try eating the entire thing by myself."
I sighed, exasperated. "Just hold on a bit. I'll let you eat your fill later. Our priority right now is meeting Miss Louise."
The other nobles in attendance—the ones we knew—were uniformly shocked by our appearance at the party. Whispers rang out in every direction.
"That's the man from Holfort?"
"I hear people call him the 'Scumbag Knight.' A merchant from the kingdom told me."
"Oh, how dreadful."
Although the gossip wounded my pride, I ignored the women and focused on searching for Miss Louise.
Marie grabbed my sleeve and tugged. "There's Loic," she whispered.
House Barielle had organized this party. Their head of house—Bellange—must have heard from the reception desk about my presence, because he headed straight over to us.
"My, my, Hero of Holfort, what an honor to have you grace us with your presence." Bellange threw his arms wide for added effect, but given his incredible stature, it only made him seem more intimidating.
Loic stood beside him, wearing a bold grin. "I am afraid I don't remember inviting you, but I hope you will enjoy your time here, nonetheless. After all, we will be making a *very* important announcement later." He held out his hand, so I grasped it. He squeezed, and I returned the favor.
"I'm aware. You're getting married, right? Congratulations," I said.
Loic's expression betrayed nothing. "I see our hero keeps his ear to the ground. Well, while I suspect you're only saying so to be polite, I appreciate the sentiment either way."
We dropped our hands at the same time.
"By the way, Hero," said Bellange, "there is something I would ask of you. That Sacred Tree Sapling in your possession is incredibly important to our country. In fact, it's most holy to us. Could we not persuade you to part with it? Of course, we would be happy to provide adequate compensation."
I smiled at him. Everyone else's ears had perked up at the mention of the sapling. As a result, the entire area had grown quiet. The sapling's importance to the republic was self-evident.

“No can do,” I said. “I’ve taken a liking to it. If you want it that bad, you’re welcome to take it by force. Assuming you’re able, that is.”
Bellange chuckled. “You’re a hard one to bargain with! Though I regret to say we cannot give up so easily. We will continue trying to negotiate with you.”
The other party-goers glared at me.
“How dare a knight from a primitive kingdom like Holfort take such an attitude.”
“He’s grown arrogant just because he managed to win against those insignificant Feivels.”
“Young men like him are always so full of themselves.”
They were really going to town with their insults.
Since they had no more time to waste on me, Bellange and Loic took their leave. As they did so, Loic said, “Please excuse us. I hope you enjoy yourselves. Oh, and one more thing… If you’re planning on trying to take Noelle back, you had best give up while you’re ahead. She belongs to me now.”
Loic kept up the good boy facade in front of everyone else, but the animosity he showed me was that of a ravenous wolf protecting its prey. He sneered, though the expression was almost comically exaggerated.
“Bastard,” Marie cursed as she glared back at him.
I smirked. “You know, I went through something like this before. A stupid prince who reminds me of you tried to pick a fight with me.”
“Oh? And?”
“What, you wanna know how it ended for him? He’s grilling skewers in a food stall as we speak. That’s right—a former crown prince was reduced to grunt work. Almost brings tears to the eyes, doesn’t it?”
It wasn’t a lie. Julius really did leave to work at the food stall whenever he had a spare moment—although he didn’t do it out of obligation. No, he was delighted to grill those skewers, claiming he’d found his calling in life. But whatever, I intended it as a threat.
Not that it had any effect on Loic. “How exciting. So do you plan to ruin the republic in the same way you took down House Feivel? I admit you’re strong, but I don’t believe mere strength will guarantee your survival.” He peeled his gaze from me, nodding his head toward some foreign diplomats. One from the Holy Kingdom of Rachel was eyeing me. “Understand now? The world isn’t quite so simple. You may be powerful, but don’t think that means everything will go the way you want it to.”
“I never have. But don’t forget: I’ve crushed every person who’s ever opposed me. You’ll be no different. Enjoy quaking in your boots at the thought of losing Noelle.”
Loic glared at me before schooling his expression. “Well, I’ll look forward to seeing how things go, Hero of Holfort. Or should I say…Scumbag Knight?”
It seemed word of my unsavory nickname had gotten around.

As Loic marched off, Marie sighed. “He’s the poster boy for an abusive, garbage boyfriend. Those types do a good job of putting on a show for the people around them. Anyway, Big Brother, are you sure you can actually get Noelle back?”
The security at this party was already impressive, but more daunting than that was how much they’d strengthened their watch around Noelle. Even Luxion would have had a difficult time extracting her without casualties on the opposing side. Not that *he* cared whether he killed anyone to begin with—he wasn’t really the peacemaking type.
“I’m still debating what to do and how best to do it,” I said. “Getting her back would be the simple part, but…”
“Leon, it’s been a while,” Albergue interrupted as he approached, his face heavy with exhaustion.
“Mr. Albergue…” I said. “What are you doing here? I have a hard time believing Bellange would invite you.”
“Actually, you see—”
Before he could explain himself, the room suddenly went dark as a spotlight flickered on, illuminating the stage in the corner. Loic stood on top of it with Noelle beside him. She wore a dress that covered most of her figure, and her neck was obscured by a number of accessories.
Loic took her right hand and lifted it into the air. “It’s been over a decade since House Lespinasse was wiped out, which means the chair of the Priestess has been empty all this time. But that ends today! This woman—Noelle Zel Lespinasse—bears the Priestess’s Crest on the back of her right hand! We assumed her house no longer existed—but she has survived.”
Applause rang out, indicating that no one here was surprised by this revelation.
Mr. Albergue’s expression turned grim in the dim light. Perhaps he still hadn’t forgotten his anger toward House Lespinasse.
Noelle stood by Loic and smiled, waving at everyone.
Marie took one look at her and turned to me. “This is bad. I’d bet every penny I have that she’s covered in bruises under that dress. Her expression is stiff too, which means they’ve probably caked makeup on her to hide her pallor.”
“You can read that much just from her appearance?”
“Call it a woman’s intuition.”
Was her intuition something I could really rely on? Skeptical as I was, Luxion reappeared after having wandered off. “Marie is entirely correct,” he informed me. “They have put makeup on Noelle to hide the bruising, and there’s even more on the rest of her body.”
Then why is she smiling and waving like that?
“Because she thinks her sacrifice will make everyone else happy,” Marie said, as if reading my mind. “Plus, the further you drive a person into a corner, the further you weaken their ability to think straight. She’s losing

the will to escape her situation. I'm sure people who don't get what it's like would tell her to run if things were that bad, but it's not that simple."
Was this Marie's own personal experience speaking…? Either way, it pissed me off to see Noelle suffering.
"Now then, since you all know the Priestess has reemerged, I am sure you are anxious about what comes next," Loic continued. "There is currently no Guardian. However, that will soon change in the coming days. I, Loic Leta Barielle, will soon marry Noelle and take up the mantle of Guardian!"
Everyone clapped and cheered.
Guess this means Loic has laid the groundwork for their planned takeover.
As I watched, someone suddenly grabbed my hand. I whipped around to find Miss Louise.
"I finally found you," she whispered. "Come, quickly."
Mr. Albergue gaped. "Louise, you're the one who summoned him?"
"I'll explain things later. For right now, Noelle is our bigger concern."
We slipped out of the dark venue, retreating to a room Miss Louise had prepared for us.

***

Back in the party hall, one other person had noticed Leon and Marie's appearance at the party—Lelia, who was accompanying Emile.
Those jerks—do they really plan to go off script again?! She had panicked after watching them leave with Albergue and his daughter. "Emile, I need to fix my makeup real quick."
"What? But you just did that a moment ago—"
"Don't ask so many questions."
Emile jumped in surprise and averted his gaze. "Y-yes, all right. I'm sorry. Go ahead, take your time." It seemed he'd chosen to interpret her response as her saying she needed to go to the bathroom. As a lady, that was a bit embarrassing, but Lelia was more concerned with finding out what Leon and the others were up to.
I can't believe they're going off on their own again!
Lelia hurried after them.

***

After hearing everything Miss Louise had to say, the first person to speak was Mr. Albergue, who simmered with a quiet rage. "So you finally show your true colors, Fernand."
Miss Louise, on the other hand, seemed somewhat panicked. "I managed to find a good opportunity to slip out with all of you, but I am essentially under house arrest. Even if I do leave the estate, they send people to follow me, and I have nearly no freedom while there. It seems they're even reading any correspondence I send or receive."

Why was House Druille keeping Miss Louise locked up, you ask? Because they had turned traitor.
Mr. Albergue shot to his feet. “Louise, you stay here. I am going to go have a word with Fernand.”
“Father?”
“I am taking you home today. If any member of House Druille comes looking for you, you need only mention my name.”
And with that, Mr. Albergue left.
As the tension lifted from the air, Marie finally breathed out a sigh. “Jeez, that was scary. He’s an intimidating one.”
Miss Louise giggled. “He’s normally very kind, actually.”
“Sure doesn’t seem that way to me.”
As they conversed, Luxion began relaying information directly to me, making sure that no one else could hear.
“Master, it appears House Druille intends to use Louise in order to make Hugues the next leader of House Rault.”
Great, more bad news. Can’t I get any lighthearted reports for once?
Alas, it was not to be.
“There is also someone snooping by the door—Lelia. Shall I dispose of her?”
Why is murder always your go-to solution? I rolled my eyes. “Nope, I’ll let her in.”
Marie and Miss Louise immediately turned their gazes to me. I tiptoed over to the door before yanking it open to reveal our eavesdropper.
“How unbecoming for the Priestess’s younger sister,” I said with a grin.
Lelia glared at Miss Louise before quietly replying, “What are you planning? Don’t tell me you intend to ally yourself with the Raults?”
“I’m considering it.”
“Don’t play games with me!”
As we bickered, Miss Louise crossed her arms and glowered at our uninvited guest. “Lelia. So you’re involved as well. No matter, I suppose. I’ve been wanting to speak with you. There’s no use hiding it anymore.”
Once Louise gave her permission, I shooed Lelia inside before closing the door. Though she stepped forward nervously, her tone was venomous. “This will be the end of House Rault, you know.”
“That could be.” Miss Louise’s face was absent of emotion.
Marie dropped her voice and asked, “Uh, what’s going to happen now?”
“How should I know? That depends on these two.”
Lelia had only taken such a brazen attitude because she was confident in having victory over House Rault, but seeing Miss Louise unaffected by her barb left her reeling. “W-well, you won’t be able to do whatever you like anymore. I know how horribly you bullied my sister, but you won’t get away with that again.”
“I suppose not. Even if we both return to the academy, there would be no need for it anymore.”

No need for it? Marie and I traded glances. She hesitantly turned to Miss Louise. “Um, so…you mean you weren’t picking on Noelle because you hate her?”
Miss Louise laughed, grinning from ear to ear. “Oh, I definitely hate that girl. Truly, truly hate her. Lelia as well. They’ve lived ignorant and carefree this entire time, and on top of that, they even sneaked their way into the academy. They didn’t even bother changing their names. I had to wonder if they were mocking us.”
“Th-that’s not our fault! House Lespinasse’s former servants filled out our applications, not us.”
Ah, so it’s not like they used those names because they wanted to.
“The moment I saw you girls at the academy, I could barely contain my loathing,” said Miss Louise. “Even if I didn’t know all the details, I did know my father let the two heirs of House Lespinasse live.”
He let them live? What in the world is going on?
I glanced at Marie, but she merely shook her head, indicating she didn’t know either.
Ugh, she’s so useless. Since Marie wouldn’t ask, I did. “I’m hearing that you’re not fond of either of them, so why did you only ever go after Noelle?”
As she gazed at me, Miss Louise’s eyes filled with sadness. She balled her hands. “My father asked me to. ‘No fault lies with them,’ he said. Lelia already had Emile to protect her, but Noelle had no one. Not long ago, Pierre targeted her, and then that insufferable Loic fixated on her as well.”
Lelia’s face screwed. “What does that have to do with you bullying my sister?”
“Oh, I think I get it!” Marie blurted. “You warded them off by acting like she was *your* prey, and you didn’t want anyone else touching her.”
Miss Louise nodded weakly before turning back to Lelia. “I wanted nothing to do with either of you. I hated you for living in blissful ignorance. How dare you—when you don’t have a clue how my family and I feel!” She was letting her anger get the best of her. She had driven Lelia against the wall and grabbed her by the collar. Marie and I had to pull her off.
“Get Lelia out of here,” I said to Marie. “I’ll look after Miss Louise.”
“G-got it. Come on, out you go!”
Once they were gone, it was just Miss Louise and me.
“All alone together, I see,” Luxion remarked. “I do hope you’ll take care not to invoke further suspicion of two-timing.”
Oh, shut up, you floating tin can!

Chapter 10:
Villainess

AFTER DRAGGING Lelia out of the room, Marie emerged in the hallway, breathless.

Lelia had lost all composure, shocked by the revelation that Louise really did hate her. She held a hand over her chest as she griped, “What was her problem? *She’s* the villainess. *She’s* the reason we suffered so terribly. How dare she act like *she’s* the victim!”

“Let’s leave her to my brother to deal with,” said Marie. “More importantly, what about Loic? Things looked pretty bad from where I was standing. Did you really check in on him?”

Lelia huffed. “Of course I did! And I went and saw my sister too. She said everything was fine. Loic explained the collar was only for her safety.”

Marie immediately sensed that Lelia wasn’t going to be any help. *She totally let him lead her on.*

Lelia hadn’t managed to see through his mask at all. He was probably putting on a show for her like he did everyone else.

If Loic puts his mind to it, deceiving her is child’s play. Hm? Wait a second. Collar?!

“Collar… That’s right, he put a collar on her in the bad end! If he’s dragged that thing out, we’ve got a crisis on our hands. You should know that, right? We can’t afford to wait around anymore, so you better help out!”

Lelia glared at her. “He would never have put a collar on her if you and your brother hadn’t meddled. He only did it because he had no other choice—so he could protect her from you two!”

“What?! He put that thing on her before my brother even got to her, remember? You played the second game, didn’t you? Which means you had to have seen Loic’s bad end, right?”

It suddenly occurred to Marie that Lelia might be experiencing the same issue Marie had with the first game—operating under incomplete knowledge of how things went down. A sinking feeling pulled at her stomach.

“Of course I didn’t get the bad end! The walkthrough I looked up online said it was dangerous to involve yourself with any other man while doing Loic’s route, so I avoided it.”

In the game, showing affection to more than one character while pursuing Loic was a one-way trip to the bad end. As soon as Loic’s attitude changed, it was a sign he’d whip out the collar.

“You idiot!” snarled Marie. “That collar is no ordinary collar—it’s a special item! We’re headed straight for disaster!”

“What?” Lelia gaped, clearly surprised by this information.

“You did say you played through the true end at least, right?” She had mentioned something before to that effect, Marie was pretty sure.
Lelia averted her gaze. “I played with a walkthrough the whole time, so I never got any bad ends for any of the routes.”
Marie clutched her head. “You absolute moron! If we don’t do something fast, it’s game over!”
“Don’t blame me! I didn’t want to see any bad endings! Plus, it seemed like things were going well enough!”
“Forget that! *You* need to work with us. Oh, this is bad. This is really, really bad. I have to let my brother know! If we wait any longer, Noelle’s going to —” As Marie panicked, Lelia grew anxious as well.
“Are things really that serious?”
“Loic’s going to have Noelle imprisoned! That is, if things go according to the game. There’s no *real* love between them. That’s why he won’t be able to become the Guardian, which means the republic will fall!”
“That can’t happen to me!”
She’s not even worried about Noelle! Marie scowled at her. “Anyway,” she continued, “you need to help us. Now. Loic is too dangerous.”
Lelia dropped her gaze.

***

Inside the room, Miss Louise and I had settled on the sofa as I embraced her from behind. She had struggled and sobbed at first, but she had finally calmed down. Slowly, she began to speak about the past.

“My little brother Leon was meant to be engaged to Noelle. House Lespinasse brought the proposal to us.”
“I see.”
“It was a ridiculous suggestion. If things had gone according to plan, my father would have been the Guardian. Even though the Priestess had spurned him, her house started saying they needed *our* power.”
“In other words, despite having annulled her engagement with Albergue, the former Priestess had the audacity to request he wed his son to her daughter,” said Luxion. “Well, perhaps that was her attempt to mend the fence.”
Had Leon Rault married Noelle as planned and become the Guardian, that only stood to benefit his house. Miss Louise, however, didn’t seem pleased.
“And yet when my brother died, they didn’t even bother showing their faces at his funeral. They sent a representative instead, and that was it.”
That certainly seemed inconsiderate to me, but maybe that wasn’t so abnormal in the republic? “Is that customary here?” I asked.
“People send representatives if they have a good reason, but Leon was the heir to our house. The other houses at least sent their own heirs to attend, but House Lespinasse couldn’t even manage that.”
Honestly, that did make House Lespinasse sound pretty…awful. Their attitude toward the Raults, at least, was beyond redemption. Weren’t they supposed to be on the side of justice or something in the game? Why had they had such a rotten attitude?
“That’s why I hated those girls and their ignorance of all that transpired. From the bottom of my heart, I loathed them… But when we agreed to the engagement, they sent a photo of Leon’s betrothed, and he looked so happy. He started gushing to me, ‘Big Sis, look! My future bride is beautiful!’ Our father had to force a smile.”
Whoa, aren’t you being a bit too flippant about things, Other Leon? Couldn’t you at least learn to read the room a little? Well, I guess you were only five. Can’t really blame you if you didn’t know the situation.
“He wanted to meet Noelle. He was acting all mature, saying, ‘I swear I’ll make her happy.’ If all that hadn’t happened, I wouldn’t have…” Louise trailed off.
So the whole reason she’d stuck her neck out for Noelle was because her little brother had cared so much for her? She sure had a habit of carrying too much on her shoulders.
“But you still protected Noelle,” I said. “As long as you were ‘bullying’ her, no one else could mess with her.”
Louise had protected Noelle from Pierre and any other unsavories that might have approached her. This whole situation was annoyingly complicated. The villains were supposed to be evil. If they weren’t, it only made things more difficult for me when it came time to make a decision about what to do with them.

“I did it because Father asked me to. He said House Lespinasse didn’t deserve the blame. I argued that it would only make things dangerous for me if one of them were to become the Priestess, but he swore it wouldn’t be a problem.”
What was that supposed to mean? Suddenly, I remembered what Luxion had said before—why had House Lespinasse lost to the Raults when they were supposedly (sorry to say this) inferior?
“But now that it’s come to this, there’s nothing else we can do. If Noelle has been chosen as the Priestess, my father can’t oppose her.”
“Even if—hypothetically speaking—she is the Priestess of the Sacred Tree Sapling and not the Sacred Tree itself?” I asked.
“Either way, the important thing is the Priestess, not which tree chose her. She is an important figure to our people. They won’t care whether she’s the Priestess of the Sacred Tree or its sapling.”
“Ah, as I thought, then.”
This confirmed what I’d already suspected—Noelle’s status wasn’t tree-dependent.
Well, looks like rescuing her is gonna be pretty tough regardless.
Miss Louise squeezed my hand. “Hey… Do you want to save Noelle?”

***

After Noelle met with the heads of the other Six Great Houses, she was shoved into an anteroom, where she took a seat in front of a large mirror. Loic embraced her from behind, which made goosebumps rise all over her skin, but she tamped down her disgust and retained a poker face. Resisting would only prompt him to hit her.
“Noelle, Leon came to the party today.”
She sucked in a breath.
The moment Loic saw her react, his face went blank. He violently snatched Noelle’s side ponytail and yanked her around to face him. “Do you like him that much? You’re the Priestess. Would you really choose some foreigner?!”
His chest rapidly rose and fell as he shoved her from the chair. Almost immediately, he raced to her side and held her. “I’m sorry, Noelle. I don’t want to hurt you. It’s just, you really can’t show interest in another man like that.”
Loic was emotionally unstable, and every time he lashed out at her, he instantly changed his tune. Suddenly, he became sweet and gentle. Having suffered through this daily, Noelle was growing too numb to think much of it. Besides…
It’s not like I can run away even if I want to.
The collar wouldn’t allow her to escape. Her only option was to obey. Trying to flee would only bring more suffering.

“Noelle, our wedding is almost upon us. No one will be able to come between us after that. And once I’m chosen as the Guardian, I swear to protect you.”
She didn’t respond. That apparently pissed him off, because he grabbed her head and slammed it against the ground, grinding her cheek against the floor.
“Why won’t you understand how much I love you?! You’re always like this!”
Noelle quietly waited for Loic to finish beating her.
I want to go home. Someone…save me. Leon…
She wanted to escape—but she couldn’t. All she could do was silently endure her despair.

***

When I returned to Marie’s estate, Miss Cordelia came out to greet me, her expression revealing nothing. “Welcome home, Lord Leon. Did you enjoy going to the party with Lady Marie?”
“Oh, yeah, it was a blast. I really got to let myself go.”
“How wonderful to hear.” Cordelia’s gaze turned even colder than it had already been before, which was practically subzero.
Miss Yumeria was standing beside her and eagerly took my jacket after I peeled it off. “Nobles seem to have parties so regularly. It must be exhausting.” Unlike Miss Cordelia, she was a breath of fresh air—healing to the soul.
Marie looked fatigued. “My brain is shot. All we have is more problems on our plate. I couldn’t even enjoy the food.”
After everyone had cooled down, we had met back up and sat down to discuss our plans. Our biggest success was managing to secure Mr. Albergue and Miss Louise’s cooperation.
Julius popped his head out to see us. “Oh, you’re back. Well, how did it go?”
I gave him a brief overview.
“So it *is* political infighting. House Barielle is dragging everyone else into their attempts to take down the Raults.”
They were eager to rise to the top, using the Priestess as their trump card. Loic was obsessed with Noelle on a personal level, but the current head, Bellange, seemed more interested in the chairman position than anything else—or rather, in becoming the leader of the republic.
Julius nodded. “Just as we suspected. Right, well, everyone is already gathered and waiting for you.”
We joined the idiot brigade—and Carla and Kyle—in the dining hall. A nervous energy hung in the air as we walked in. Marie took her seat, and Carla poured some water for her. Kyle brought me a drink, which I gulped down before wiping my mouth with my sleeve.

“I hate to admit it, but it’s just as everyone thought,” I said. “Loic’s own motivations aside, the rest of them just want to use Noelle as a pawn in their bid for power.”
Jilk didn’t look the least bit surprised. “That is simply how it goes. I gathered what information I could at the embassy while you were gone. It seems Barielle is using whatever means they have at their disposal to try to get ahold of that sapling.”
“If you’re willing to pay, there are some officials who are slimy enough to switch sides,” said Brad with a frown. “Though we’ll be at a real disadvantage if they retaliate by buying off our ministers back in Holfort. I’d prefer if we could settle things before it comes to that.”
Greg—(Hey, why was he still half-naked?! Put on some damn clothes!)—crossed his arms. “National interests and personal interests don’t always align. Even if we get our hands on Noelle as quickly as possible, the republic’s filthy rich. They’ll just use those resources to attack our weak spot—and that’s gonna put us in an awkward position.”
Chris was the next to comment. (And why wasn’t he wearing any pants?!) “It will be best if we can claim victory quickly, but we’ll need to enlist Her Majesty’s protection after. She’s the type to put national interest ahead of personal gains.”
Roland’s name never came up. Just went to show that Miss Mylene was the real head honcho of Holfort.
Marie dropped her head against the table. “So basically, even if we save her, all that awaits us is more problems. Ugh, it’s bad news all around. Can’t there just be one easy, fix-all solution?”
I agreed with her there, which was precisely why I had decided to do just that.
“Well, what will it be, Bartfort?” Julius asked, turning to me. “If we’re able to rescue her, we can leave everything else to my mother back in the kingdom. As Chris already stated, she will put Holfort before herself. I am certain she’ll be willing to safeguard Noelle.”
It wasn’t a bad idea, but it wasn’t a good one either. The problem is that I’m a coward, so I like to make sure there isn’t a single seed of doubt left to trouble me in the future.
Plus, I’d seen that diplomat from the Holy Kingdom of Rachel at the party. That was the very nation butting heads with Miss Mylene’s homeland. If the republic found itself behooved to pick a fight with us, I didn’t doubt that Rachel would support them. They’d probably send aid to our other enemies as well and make things as hard on us as possible. We had no idea how much time it would take before the sapling was grown enough to wield the same powers as the Sacred Tree. Would Miss Mylene really be willing to protect Noelle at the risk of making so many enemies?
If we took the route the boys suggested, those concerns would remain, and as someone too fainthearted to deal with such anxiety, I couldn’t abide that.

“We can’t,” I said. “If the republic gets serious, it’ll be a gamble as to whether Miss Mylene can really keep Noelle safe or not. And if they start attacking us where we’re weakest, it’ll be a nightmare. Instead, we’re going to utterly destroy the republic’s pride.”
Julius pulled a face, but he didn’t dismiss my idea out of hand. “You have some kind of ingenious plan then, I assume? Destroying a nation’s pride is no simple matter. Do you plan to let the *Einhorn* wreak havoc again?”
“Do I really look that simpleminded to you? I’m no barbarian who jumps the gun and goes to war at the first sign of trouble. I prefer to resolve things peacefully.”
“Peacefully, you say?” Jilk laughed and shrugged. “Oh, I do so hope your definition of peaceful is more amicable than I fear.”
These guys really do like taking pot shots at me, don’t they? I waved them off. “Don’t worry. This will definitely break them. However, before we do that, we need to save Noelle. I’m planning to move forward with the operation on the day of their wedding. What do you think?”
Since I’d made my decision to do it, I was going to see it through to the end.
Marie sat up straight. “I see you have your motivation back! But the wedding day? Don’t you think their security will be even stronger than normal then?”
“Yes, and I’m sure they’ll be wary of attack,” said Chris as he stroked his chin. “It will be an important day for the republic, after all. If any issues were to occur, it would ruin House Barielle’s image—wait, don’t tell me that’s your aim?”
Destroy the Barielles’ reputation? Yes, that was an appealing idea, and it was *one* of the reasons I had chosen their wedding day for my plan. However, that would only serve to anger, not break them.
“You really think that’s all I have in store for them?”
Greg shook his head. “Nope. You’re capable of way more cruelty than that.”
Jeez, thanks for the compliment. I won’t forget that, you jerk. I threw my arms wide. “All right, let us begin! We’re going to stomp on their pride so hard that they’ll never be able to oppose us again!”
Everyone reluctantly raised a hand and let out a feeble cheer. “Uh, yay…”
Oh, come on, put more feeling into it! This is where the real fun begins!

***

On the eve of Noelle’s wedding day, an eerie quiet had fallen over Marie’s estate.
Cordelia was livid. “I cannot believe this. What is he thinking?!”
Yumeria, working alongside her, glanced at her fellow maid and wrinkled her forehead. “I wonder if they’re all okay.”
Cleare was watching over the two. “Nothing to fret over,” she said. “Anyway, when you go shopping, be sure to buy enough for Elle too!”

Cordelia glanced at the sofa. A life-sized doll sat there, with a face that resembled Leon's. Similar ones fashioned after the other boys were planted about the house as well. Luxion's robots moved them around periodically. Cordelia couldn't begin to fathom why.
"What's the meaning of this?"
"Oh, *so much* meaning," said Cleare. "More importantly, aren't you a bit cold toward Master? If you really are one of the Redgrave maids, I'd think mixing your personal and professional life beneath you, wouldn't you?"
"That is entirely Lord Leon's fault! He's affianced to someone as incredible as Lady Angelica, yet he's far too close to Marie."
Yumeria tilted her head. "Huh? The two of them may be close, but it's definitely not in the romantic sense."
"What? Really?"
"Yes. Um, I don't know how to put it, but…they're kind of like siblings?"
Cordelia couldn't refute that. She had no experience with dating, having worked at the duke's estate from an early age. Even though she had attended the academy, she'd refrained from romantic relations to maintain her virtue. Thus, she had no basis with which to evaluate the tenor of their relationship.
"Yumeria's right," said Cleare. "They're basically like brother and sister."
"N-now that you mention it, I do get that impression… B-but he's still got something going on with these other women!"
"Oh? And what's your problem with that? He's putting his life on the line to save a girl about to be forced into a marriage against her will. I'd call that pretty heroic, wouldn't you?"
"Political marriages are hardly a new phenomenon. By disrupting this one, he's on the verge of instigating a monumental international scandal! And how many lives will be upended as a result?"
"So you support political marriages, then?" Cleare eyed Cordelia. "That's funny, considering the romance novels you keep in your room often involve girls being forced into marriages only to be saved by their true loves."
"H-how do you know about those?! At any rate, fiction and reality are separate matters. Dreams are alluring precisely because they're dreams."
Cordelia's words only made her sound even more like a young maiden with her head in the clouds.
"But I hear she's being abused," said Yumeria. "I don't entirely grasp the situation surrounding their families—it sounds complicated—but if she doesn't want to go through with this, I support them saving her."
Cordelia sighed. "Yes, I agree with that, but nations have their own circumstances to consider. People can't simply act on self-interest without regard for those."
"I get where you're coming from," said Cleare, "but I'd appreciate it if you'd stop looking at Master through a biased lens."
Well, it was true that Cordelia didn't have the best impression of Leon. She could admit she hadn't been fair. Since she was working at this estate, she

would have been the first to know if anything illicit happened between him and Marie, and she hadn't yet found any evidence to suggest anything had.
"Very well," she conceded. "It seems I have some reflecting to do. I will try to have a little more faith in Lord Leon. That said, are you sure this thing is of any use?"
No sooner had she pointed than the Leon doll sitting on the couch toppled over.

***

Two silhouettes lurked outside of Marie's estate, keeping watch from a nearby building. They glanced down at their watches.
"It's almost time. How are things looking?"
"Not much movement. All of them are inside right now."
"Keep an eye out. Can't afford to screw up today."
"Okay, but how are things down at the harbor? They have two of those one-horned ships, right?"
"Our security forces are on guard. The military even came out just in case, but there's been no movement. Doesn't seem like anyone has tried to enter either ship, so we're probably safe."
They continued observing the mansion.
"Still, it's odd. They're not moving much at all."
"Hey, if they're cooped up inside, that's good enough for us. Once we get past today, Lord Loic will be the Guardian, and we'll finally be relieved of our duties here."
House Barielle had dispatched lookouts to keep an eye on both the mansion and the harbor. They had no small number keeping tabs on the *Einhorn* and the *Licorne*, all for the purpose of being able to alert Loic the second that Leon and his friends tried to act.

***

The Sacred Tree's Temple normally played host to the Six Great Houses' assemblies, but it was also used by the Priestess for ceremonial purposes. Special permission had been granted to use it for Noelle's wedding.
Members of the Six Great Houses gathered in the assembly hall, where they praised and congratulated Loic.
The leader of House Feivel, Lambert, was obviously trying to brownnose.
"Ah, what a truly joyous occasion. Now the republic will finally have a Guardian again. We can't let those fleas in the kingdom get too complacent. We're expecting great things from you, Loic."
The Sacred Tree gave its greatest blessing to the Guardian, and the power that came with it was absolute. The hopes of the people were resting on Loic.

“Noelle is the Priestess of the Sapling,” he said. “So I am afraid I don’t know how much power I will be able to draw from it as Guardian.”
“O-oh, really? Still, it’s good to see a Guardian and Priestess revived nevertheless. The republic can finally rest at ease.”
Any Priestess at all was still good news for the republic. Not to mention, she would soon select her Guardian. The Six Great Houses were anxious with anticipation.
Bellange glanced sidelong at Albergue. “It has been a while since we had a Guardian from one of the Great Houses, considering the previous one was of common birth. Isn’t that right, Albergue?”
Albergue didn’t respond to the barb. He kept his arms crossed over his chest and closed his eyes.
Beside him, Fernand said, “Chairman, please don’t pay him any mind.”
“I didn’t plan to,” Albergue curtly responded before turning to Loic. “Nonetheless, I hope you will let me extend my congratulations to you.”
“Thank you, Chairman.”
“As someone who failed to receive the Guardian’s Crest before, allow me to give you some advice: Don’t let your guard down until it’s actually yours.”
After saying that, Albergue spun on his heel and left.
Bellange snorted. Fernand glanced briefly at Loic before following Albergue. Once they were gone, Bellange finally chuckled. “Nothing more than the dying whimper of a powerless man. He’s pathetic—having lost the previous Priestess to a peasant. You have nothing to fear, Loic.”
“I know, Father. He really is a pitiful man. He still hasn’t noticed that Fernand is on our side.”
The other house leaders started to join in the conversation.
“Weren’t the two of them arguing yesterday?”
“That young brat Fernand probably put him in his place. Albergue holds no sway anymore.”
“I look forward to seeing his despair when he learns of Fernand’s betrayal.”
It was a rare occasion indeed to see five of the Six Great Houses agree on anything as they did in that moment.
It’s all thanks to you, Leon, thought Loic. I wouldn’t have been able to unify them without you. Consider me grateful, Hero.
Ironically, it was the threat of Leon that had mobilized the other houses to join hands, with Bellange at their center. Albergue showed a clear bias for the foreign boy, which only made the other house leaders nervous. They saw Loic as a ray of hope.
Your mere existence gave me the power I needed. The board is now stacked in my favor. All you can do is bite your nails in frustration and watch.
Loic was certain that victory was his.
A servant suddenly entered the room. “My lords, it’s time.”
Noelle and Loic’s wedding ceremony was about to begin.

Chapter 11:
Bride Thief

NOELLE STARED at her reflection in the mirror. Her wedding dress was beautiful, but the collar around her neck detracted from its splendor. As the servants finished covering it up with accessories, Lelia suddenly popped in.
"Hey, Big Sis…" Lelia's face was lined with worry.
Noelle smiled at her. "What's the matter?"
"A-are you okay?"
What part of this looks okay to you? Noelle thought, but on that matter, she held her tongue. "Oh, I'm a bit nervous, but that's about it. You should act a little more excited. With this, we'll both be part of the nobility again."
Lelia dropped her gaze. Servants of House Barielle were all around them. Neither sister could say what was really on her mind. But Noelle did feel like she owed her sister an apology.
"I'm sorry," she said. "If I hadn't been found out, you wouldn't have gotten wrapped up in all of this."
Lelia shook her head. "I-I'm fine. You're the one I'm—"
"Lady Noelle, it's time," a servant interrupted. "Please excuse yourself, Lady Lelia."
As soon as her younger twin was gone, the last trace of emotion vanished from Noelle's face. She was like any other girl—she had long fantasized about what she might look like in a wedding dress. But now that she was wearing one, all she felt was immense sadness. Her eyes misted over.
Why did things have to come to this?
One crest was all it took to completely change a person's life. She hated that.

***

The assembly hall was enormous. Rows of pillars resembling enormous trees supported a high ceiling. Light spilled in through stained-glass windows painted with pictures of the Sacred Tree. Noelle walked slowly down an illuminated walkway, surrounded by procession on all sides. Every member of the audience bore a crest—they were all the Sacred Tree's "chosen," here to celebrate the rebirth of their new Priestess and soon-to-be Guardian. Not a single one of them looked at Noelle, the human being.
None of them have even the slightest interest in me as a person.
All they cared about was her crest and the title it afforded her. They simply wanted to regain what they had lost—a bridge between themselves and the Sacred Tree. None of them had any regard for her happiness. Most assumed she would be happy to marry Loic.
This isn't what I wanted. What I really wanted was…

Even if Noelle entertained other futures, no one else could take her place. She had already lost her right to freedom.

I was an idiot for acting all excited when the crest first appeared. I should have known that this was the true fate that awaited me as Priestess. I'll be tied to that tree for the rest of my life.

The future she had hoped for would never come to be.

What was that silly legend about the Priestess being able to live with the person she loves? Nothing but lies.

The only reasons she hadn't tried to run were the collar around her neck and her fear of what would happen to the country in her absence. Noelle had no love for the nobility. Even if few were as extreme in their actions as Pierre, they were all still conceited.

Without exception, in a crisis, the people were the ones who suffered. Aristocrats fought and fought their defensive battles with other nations, never caring that the common people paid the price. The people who died in the field bore no crests. Nobles were rarely killed in battle, if only because of the protection the Sacred Tree had granted them.

Noelle loved the republic, but she hated the nobles who wielded its power. But she knew becoming Priestess was for the people's sake as well.

I wish I could have at least chosen my Guardian. Why does it have to be Loic?

When she finally came to the altar, she found herself in front of a statue of the Sacred Tree. Bellange stood beside it. Since the Sacred Tree was considered holy and divine, the ones closest to it—those of the Six Great Houses—acted as priests, or representatives of the tree's will.

Bellange's crest had manifested behind him as a light hovering in the air. In ceremonies like this, the priest always made their crest visible so that those present knew they acted as the Sacred Tree's witness. And on days like today, house leaders like Bellange were always those who held that power.

"You look perfect together," Bellange whispered. "Now then, Priestess, I must ask you to give Loic the Guardian's Crest. You understand how to do that, don't you?"

They had informed her of the process beforehand. She only needed to silently call out to the Sacred Tree and say, "This man is most fitting to be your Guardian."

Noelle turned her gaze to Loic. She clasped her hands and closed her eyes. Inwardly, she hesitated. Was it really right to give him the Guardian's Crest? But she had no other choice.

Sacred Tree, this man will be your Guardian. Please, I beg you, bestow the crest upon him.

As she prayed, the crest on the back of her hand lit up, and behind her appeared the image of the sapling—only three meters tall. Those present gasped, awed by the spectacle.

"It's finally happening!"

"The future of the republic looks promising!"

“What about the Guardian’s Crest? Is it…?”
However, while Noelle’s crest had lit up, nothing else happened. Ordinarily, the Guardian’s Crest was then supposed to appear on Loic’s hand, but it hadn’t. With it, their engagement would be officially sealed, and the wedding could commence, but even after waiting several minutes, nothing happened.
Loic gritted his teeth. “Noelle, you truly intend to betray me here?”
“I-I’m doing what you asked! I swear!” Noelle tried again, wishing even harder this time.
Sacred Tree, please heed my voice. The man in front of me is your Guardian. He is the one who will protect you.
Noelle desperately pleaded with the Sacred Tree, but it refused to give Loic the crest. Instead, what sounded like a young girl’s voice—one only Noelle could hear—responded to her.
It was the sapling. Though its words were clumsily cobbled together and hard to decipher, Noelle got the impression that it was rejecting her demands in no uncertain terms.
Her eyes flew open. “What…?” In her surprise, she dropped her hands.
“Priestess, could you hurry it up?” Bellange said in a panic. “Are you perhaps too embarrassed to do this in front of such an audience?”
Noelle shook her head. She wasn’t trying to be obstinate, but the Sacred Tree wouldn’t grant her request. “N-no. I prayed like you asked me to, b-but it refused me.”
The room, which had been completely silent, erupted in whispers.
Loic furrowed his brows and grabbed Noelle by the neck. “So once again you choose to defy me!”
She grabbed one of his hands with both of hers, but she couldn’t peel him off. Soon, he was choking her. As an uproar broke out, Bellange lunged forward to try to stop his son, but Loic’s crest appeared, circling them in flames so no one could approach—not even Bellange.
“Loic, stop! Don’t you dare kill her!”
Loic’s fingers dug into Noelle’s skin.
“Ungh…” Noelle didn’t have enough air to speak, so all she could do was grunt.
He grinned maniacally at her. “If you weren’t ever going to be mine, I should have just done this sooner.”
Noelle inwardly prepared herself, knowing she might die—but then that voice from before called out to her again, its pronunciation as juvenile as a child still learning to speak.
The Guardian will come, it said. He will come to protect you!
The Guardian? Noelle thought, skeptical. But I haven’t chosen any Guardian. How would one come to—
It was hard to think through the pain of Loic’s crushing grip, and the flames he’d produced singed the train of her dress.
Suddenly, the glass ceiling shattered as a black Armor crashed through.

Arroganz!
Leon's voice boomed through the assembly hall. "I've come to take back my bride!"
He certainly sounded chipper.
With Arroganz's entrance, wind whipped through the room, snuffing out the flames. The gust was even strong enough to knock Loic back and send Noelle tumbling. She craned her neck to see Leon step out of his Armor, clothed in a white tuxedo.
It actually looks pretty great on him.
Noelle realized how messed up it was to think such a thing at that moment, and on top of that, she was mortified to be so happy to see him.
Loic glared at Leon. "What are you doing here?!" he spat. "Don't tell me you're here to kidnap my bride? How dare you show up in a white tuxedo! Shall I have your country lecture you on proper etiquette?!"
The audience booed at Leon, but he didn't seem to mind. He simply pulled out a handgun, took aim, and began firing rubber bullets into the crowd. They shrieked in terror.
To everyone's shock, he then said, "It's always like this—always the sinner who acts like he's the one who's been wronged. This etiquette you speak of, does it include stealing someone else's bride and forcing her into a marriage she doesn't want? Is that the Alzerian definition? Funny, you call the rest of us savages, but I'd argue you're the real cavemen here. Might wanna take a good look in the mirror for a change."
No one had any idea what he was talking about.
"What nonsense are you spouting—and you dare storm in on an important ceremony with your Armor?! How did you even get in here? This temple should be surrounded by an armada of—"
Leon smirked. "Oh, them? They were a real pain, actually. We had to sneak in here yesterday because someone—I won't name names—was having our mansion watched. Setting up this little trick was a real time killer."
Loic clicked his tongue and turned to the soldiers who came storming in. "Kill him!"
Leon had made a terrible mistake by exiting his armor. He had been left completely vulnerable.
Noelle screamed, "Leon, run!"
That only pissed Loic off. He brought his left hand close to his chest, causing the chain connected to Noelle's collar to reappear. With it, he yanked her to him and wrapped an arm around her throat to silence her.
"Enough!" Loic snarled.
Leon tossed his handgun into Arroganz's cockpit. The soldiers fired at him, but an invisible wall blocked all of their bullets. Leon peeled off one of his white gloves and held his right hand toward Loic.
"Quit acting so full of yourself," said Leon. "It's time for you to bow down."

As he spoke, an enormous magic circle appeared behind Leon—or rather, behind Arroganz. It was the Guardian's Crest, and it was almost six meters tall. As it shone with green light, the audience was left speechless.
Noelle was as shocked as everyone else. Why does he have the Guardian's Crest? I haven't even picked anyone yet.
In that moment, she finally realized what the sapling had done.

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Louise watched quietly as the light of Leon's Guardian Crest poured over her. Hugues panicked beside her, but she ignored him.
"Why does he have the Guardian's Crest?! Louise, did you know about this?!"
The night when her house had negotiated an alliance with Leon, Louise had returned to her place at the Druille estate rather than go home as her father had wanted. It had all been in order to help lay the groundwork for Leon's scheme.
More important than what had brought her to this point, however, was how Leon looked right now.
Leon…
He reminded her so much of her brother—Leon Sara Rault. Shortly before his death, when his engagement with Noelle had been finalized, he'd gushed about becoming the next Guardian. Their father had listened to him with a troubled look on his face, Louise remembered, but he had surely been happy that his son would be able to secure the position he had missed.
She even remembered a conversation she'd had with her little brother.
Yes, I'm pretty sure…Leon told me…
The young boy had said, "Big Sis, I'll be the next Guardian! Pretty awesome, huh?!"
"Awesome, sure, but I wonder whether you'll really be able to receive the title or not. The Guardian is supposed to be an extraordinary person, you know."
"I definitely can! And then, I'll be able to protect everyone!"
"Everyone?"
"Yeah! The Sacred Tree, the Priestess, the nobles and the common folk—all the people of Alzer!"
"You really think you're capable of that? You can't even beat me right now," she teased.
"W-well, I'll get good enough to beat you soon! And then I'll be able to save you too, Big Sis!"
"If you say so. I won't expect much, but we'll just have to wait and see."
"I'll make you eat those words! I swear I'll be the one to come save you someday!"
Louise had promptly hugged him, endeared by his declaration.

Only a few short months later, Leon died. He was buried beneath a cold grave marker, and it had rained the day of his funeral.
That day, as she wore her black mourning dress, Louise stood in front of his grave and whispered, “You big liar. You promised you would save me someday. How are you supposed to do that if you’re gone?”
Her brother hadn’t lived long enough to become the Guardian, let alone to save hundreds of people. He hadn’t even been able to save himself. Yet before her now stood Leon, bearing the Guardian’s Crest.
Leon…
Despite being an outsider who had only come to the country to study abroad, Leon relayed orders to the republic’s soldiers as if they were his to command.
“Did you not hear me the first time? Disrespectful bunch of worms. You stand before the Guardian’s Crest! Bow down!”
He was certainly far from the picture of a Guardian who had come to deliver them to salvation.

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The Alzerians before me were dumbstruck. I had appeared before them so suddenly—bearing the Guardian’s Crest—that none of them knew what to make of it. Bellange gaped at me. He tried blinking, as if he thought he was imagining the crest behind me, but no matter how many times he did it, the image remained.
“Now then, I think it’s time you thieves returned my bride to me. You *do* know the Guardian and Priestess are a pair, right? Which means *you* tried to steal Noelle. That’s pretty barbaric behavior, no matter how you slice it.”
Per the republic’s ideology, Loic was the bride thief here, not me.
Although, the truth is that I’m the one doing the thieving.
“You lot sure are arrogant, planning such an extravagant wedding,” I went on. “Did you honestly think Loic would be chosen as your Guardian? Don’t be silly. There was never any chance of that.”
I was having a field day, ripping them a new one. They’d pissed me off so many times that I was letting all of my anger out on them. I even spotted Lambert in the crowd, grinding his teeth in frustration.
“Simply put, the Guardian has to be someone strong enough to protect the Sacred Tree, right?” I asked. “Normally, that means someone from the Six Great Houses has the highest likelihood of being chosen—yet despite such a buffet to select from, it picked me instead. Doesn’t that basically mean you were all so unreliable that it had no other options? Hey, you know, that also means the Sacred Tree has recognized that I’m stronger than any of your great noble houses.”
“Cut the crap!”
“How insolent!”
“Arrogant pig!”

Curses erupted from the crowd, but to me, it sounded little more than the whining of a bunch of losers. After all, that was what they were.
“Those are the facts, right? I mean, think about it… Why *hasn’t* the Sacred Tree chosen any one of you as Priestess or Guardian?”
I was touching on a topic that most people were completely ignorant of, which was why they all went silent and listened.
Ah, this is incredible—a perfect opportunity to let loose and piss them all off in the process. Yes, it really does feel amazing to antagonize and lecture people as if I’m superior to them! I hate being the one of the receiving end of that crap, but damn if it isn’t awesome being the one to do it!
“The Sacred Tree is supposed to pick someone who can protect it, right? That means none of you were up to snuff. Forget the sapling, the Sacred Tree itself has basically abandoned you jerks, hasn’t it?” I cackled, further provoking their anger. “But I guess you can’t really be blamed, can you? After all, you were so weak that you lost to some outsider like me. It’s no wonder the Sacred Tree cut you off, once it realized you’re basically completely unreliable.”
Uh-oh, did I strike a nerve? You all look so red in the face! In that case, I’m going to drive the nail in deeper!
“Don’t get whiny at me for being right. I only came here to retrieve Noelle. I’m *trying* to do this peacefully. Seeing you all pitch a hissy fit was a real shock.”
The traitor, Fernand, scowled as he glared up at me. “Our apologies for the lukewarm reception. We didn’t exactly anticipate this turn of events. If possible, we’d appreciate you coming down to speak with us.”
Yeah, okay, I’m not in the habit of trusting turncoats.
“There’s nothing to talk about. Hand over the Priestess, plain and simple. It’s my duty to protect her and the sapling. And if you bandits don’t comply, Sappie’s going to get all testy about it.”
Fernand opened his mouth, no doubt to squabble with me, but Loic lost his patience and interrupted before he could.
“You’ve spewed nothing but nonsense this entire time! *I* am the one who first fell in love with Noelle! She’s *mine*! You really think I would hand her over to anyone? If it means losing her to someone else, I’d rather—” He reached for the sword hanging at his side—one that was supposed to be merely decorative.
Screams rang out through the crowd.
“Luxion!” I bellowed.
“No issues here. Whenever you’re ready, Master.”
My katana shot out of the cockpit and I grabbed it, yanking it from its sheath before leaping down. There were five or six meters between me and the floor—which was honestly fairly terrifying—but I swallowed my fear. Knights and soldiers stepped forward to stop me, but I flipped my sword around, striking them with the blunt edge. Many of them were overreliant on their crests and lacked the fighting skills to oppose me anyway.

“These guys are chumps. At this level, they’re all failures by kingdom standards.”
“Men in the kingdom are forced to hone themselves in order to provide for their women,” said Luxion. “That means entering dungeons and putting their lives on the line fighting monsters to make money. Their strength is a result of painstaking effort to appeal to their female peers.”
Stop! You’re gonna make me cry.
But he was right; boys back home had no choice but to become strong. Strong enough to make it out of a monster-infested dungeon with loot they could sell for coin. The strength this training had afforded me was turning out to be of great benefit. I easily defeated those standing in my way—until only Loic was left.
He held his right hand out toward me. The crest floating in the air behind him glowed, and flames gathered, forming a fireball. “Do you really think you can beat me without your Armor?!” Loic snapped.
“Don’t forget, I have a crest too! But I’ll be nice and not use it against you this time.”
As his fireball came hurtling toward me, I lifted my sword and cut straight through it. The flames burst on impact, but I was left unscathed. Loic gaped at me. I flipped my blade around and crouched before lunging—lopping off his right arm.
To Loic, it must have looked like I’d struck in the blink of an eye. With his right arm gone, the crest behind him suddenly disappeared, as he could no longer draw on the Sacred Tree’s power. I delivered a swift kick to his stomach and sent him sprawling. Then I stepped on his left arm and stabbed my sword through it.
Loic shrieked. “My arm! My aaaaarm!”
“Quit blubbering. It’s your fault that I had to do this,” I said, prying the bracelet from his damaged wrist.
Everyone else watched in horror-struck silence, unable to move. Loic had tried to kill the Priestess, and now I—a foreigner—bore the Guardian’s Crest. They likely had no idea how to process or handle the situation.
Eh, someone will make a move soon enough.
I secured the bloody bracelet on my left wrist and held my hand out toward Noelle, who had picked herself up into a sitting position on the floor nearby.
“Come,” I said.

Tears poured down Noelle’s cheeks. She shook her head. “Stop. Why are you doing this?! I tried to forget about you, and then you pull this? You’re a complete jerk! Do you have any idea how much I… How much…”
I understood how she felt, but we didn’t have time. I hauled her up, even as she struggled, but as I turned to leave, I found myself surrounded. A number of people had rushed over to Loic to perform healing magic and were already reconnecting the limb I’d managed to cut off.
“Oh? You plan on standing against the man who bears the Guardian’s Crest?” I asked Fernand, who blocked my path. He had a weapon in hand and his crest was glowing, signaling he was about to use his powers against me.
“You may be the Guardian,” he conceded, “but we cannot allow you to take the Priestess!”
It seemed the other knights and soldiers agreed, as they encircled me with their weapons and crests at the ready.
“Your eagerness for battle is commendable, but you seem to be forgetting something.” I glanced at Arroganz.
Fernand howled, “You’re not the only one with an Armor!”
As if on cue, several Armors charged into the building, headed straight for the unmanned Arroganz. Those on the ground kept their eyes trained on me, apparently thinking they had no need to fear my suit without me in it. They were sadly mistaken.
“You really think that will be enough to stop Arroganz?”
As the other Armors tried to restrain Arroganz’s arms, it snatched their heads in its hands and crushed them.
Fernand’s jaw dropped. “It can move without a pilot? No—someone else must have been in it from the beginning!”
Actually, he had it right the first time, but I had no obligation to inform him of that, so I kept the truth to myself.
“All right, move aside,” I said. “Make way for the Guardian! And Noelle, quit squirming, would you? Please.”
“Put me down! Put me down, I say!” She was sobbing and thrashing around, which made it a nightmare trying to carry her.
“Protect the Priestess!” Fernand bellowed. “Lord Leon, she clearly has no wish to go with you. We cannot allow you to leave!”
Mr. Albergue stepped forward, Miss Louise standing beside him. “Put down your weapons!” he bellowed. Then he turned and glared at his rival, who had at some point slumped to the floor. “Bellange, I expect you to explain yourself later. And let it be known I will not tolerate any discourtesy toward the Guardian!”
Since Albergue was the assembly chairman, the soldiers and knights obeyed.
Fernand whipped around to face Albergue. “Chairman, do you really mean to let him go?!”

“Calm down. What man in his right mind wields a weapon in a peaceful negotiation? You should know, Fernand, I am already aware of your involvement in this mess.”
Fernand lowered his gaze and dropped his blade.
Bellange, still seated on the floor, clutched his head. “That fool of a son!”
Speaking of foolish sons, where was Loic anyway?
Everyone cast their gazes at where he’d been bleeding out before, and the doctors standing there awkwardly averted their eyes.
“What happened to Loic?” Mr. Albergue demanded.
“Well, um… Once we reattached his arm, he shook us off and headed outside—”
An explosion suddenly rocked the temple, causing the whole building to tremble. Miss Louise shot me a look.
“There’s no need to do this. It’s already over,” she said.
Okay, hold up. Why does everyone always pin the blame on me for every little thing? Sure, I did plant some explosives, but I haven’t even touched the switch.
“Wasn’t me. I haven’t pressed *that* big red button today.”
The gathered stared at me, aghast that I’d even do such a thing. But then they quickly traded glances with each other, confused as to what could be causing the explosions if it wasn’t the brazen interloper.
Bellange peeled himself off the floor, panicked. “My stupid son! Does he truly intend to bring any more shame on us than he already has?!”

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An Armor had burst through the Temple walls, escaping outside. It was a specially made model, owned by House Barielle. All such armaments in the republic were powered by energy taken from the Sacred Tree. This required the pilot to have a crest, and it enhanced the suit’s capabilities, making it far more powerful than any ordinary Armor. This was the reason the republic had thus far gone undefeated in defensive battles.
Of all the Armors that House Barielle possessed, this one in particular could only be operated by someone from one of the Six Great Houses. Normally, this machine was used by a commanding officer or some other high-ranking official, as it had specifically been made to accommodate a pilot with one of the more powerful crests, and it made use of the massive energy such a person could harness from the Sacred Tree.
It was large for an Armor, with a sleek design and crimson armored plating. Since it was made to stand out on the field, appendages that resembled wings spread out from its back. And while much emphasis had been placed on its appearance, its performance capabilities were no less impressive.
Loic sat in the cockpit, bloody bandages wrapped around both arms, and gripped the control sticks. His eyes gleamed red. “Sacred Tree! Give me

your power, that I might cover the land in flames! I will give you everything. You can have all of me!”
Rage had consumed him, drowning out any sense he might otherwise have had. All he wanted to do now was destroy everything. His crest manifested behind him as he surged through the air. He accelerated with such force that the Armor creaked around him. Finally, he whipped out his sword. It was covered in flames, and as he sliced through the air, the fire formed a crescent beam that shot toward the temple, slicing through its walls with explosive force.
“Burn—I’ll burn everything! Including Noelle and that *man* she’s with! All who fail to recognize me will come to ash!”
More of the Sacred Tree’s power flowed through him than ever before. His arm—which Leon had just severed—still flared with pain. With each throb, his hate flared.
“Get out here, Leon. I’ll slaughter you in front of her and make her regret not choosing me!”
People came spilling out of the temple, trying to escape. The surrounding airships and Armors had noticed the fuss and were drawing closer. One of them flew House Druille’s flag, and it swooped down to retrieve Hugues before making its way up toward Loic.
“Loic, stop this!” Hugues called out. “Don’t destroy the Temple. My brother said we’re abandoning the plan!”
Loic’s lips curled into a deranged smile. “A sycophant like him has no right to give *me* orders!”
He thrust his left hand out, shooting flames that consumed the airship Hugues was riding in. As it went down, Armors came soaring toward Loic.
“No, Lord Hugues!”
“Lord Loic, what are you thinking?!”
“Stop this immediately, please!”
Loic merely flicked his wrist, cutting right through them. They exploded soon after.
“Abandon the plan? The plan doesn’t matter anymore! All I ever wanted was Noelle!” Loic shrieked even as tears streamed down his face, his eyes bloodshot and glowing red.
Then the man he hated so much came soaring out from the crumbling Temple.
“Tsk, tsk. You really are making a mess of things. I had hoped to settle this more peacefully,” said Leon.
The crest behind Loic glowed even brighter as he cried, “So you’ve finally come, Scumbag Knight!”
Loic charged Arroganz with his sword raised, but Arroganz easily sidestepped him. At the same time, it reached for a battleaxe on its back and swung, chopping off the shoulder plating on Loic’s Armor.
“This is child’s play,” Leon said mockingly.
Even as Loic’s mind boiled with anger, he tried to study Leon’s movements.

Damn Holfortian savage! Looks like you're a steady hand when it comes to piloting, but your choice to dodge reveals that you're avoiding a true test of power between us. My Armor dwarfs yours. I can win this battle through the sheer superiority of its capabilities!

He was right; the red Armor towered over Arroganz. The latter looked built for strength, but it had nothing on Loic's suit.

"You seem confident in your Armor's performance, but this suit was specially made by House Barielle! It feeds off energy from the Sacred Tree, which means I don't have to worry about running out of mana. But that's not the case for yours, is it? Even assuming you could draw power from the sapling, it doesn't hold a candle to the tree!"

The victor in this clash was a given. Between the Sacred Tree's blessing and his more capable Armor, Loic was sure of that. He was confident that such an enormous gap couldn't be overcome by skill alone.

He brandished his weapon in the air and pressed the attack. The soldiers and knights on the ground—as well as the nearby airships and Armors—could do nothing but watch as the battle unfolded. They no doubt hoped for Leon's defeat.

As Loic brought his sword down, Arroganz raised the battleaxe to meet it. The flames disappeared from Loic's blade, which instead began glowing red.

As Loic increased the pressure of his attack, the heat from his weapon began melting through Leon's axe.
"I'll rend you in two!" Loic snarled.
A voice—one that didn't belong to Leon—suddenly interrupted. "Master, how long do you intend to keep playing this game?"
"Aw, come on. My opponent seems really invested in this, so I'm doing some, uh…what would you call it? Acting?" Leon's voice carried no hint of panic, but Loic was sure he was bluffing.
"Cut the bravado!"
Leon's voice suddenly dropped several octaves. "Okay, kiddo. It's time I showed you how it's really done. This is how you put your opponent in their place."

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Loic intended to beat Arroganz by relying on his Armor's (supposedly superior) capabilities. That infuriated Luxion.
"I cannot put up with your games anymore, Master."
"Aw, don't say that. The gallery is all fired up watching us."
Luxion intercepted the voices of the audience down below and played them for me.
"Yeah, that's it! Take that kingdom junk heap down!"
"Are you sure we shouldn't intervene? The chairman said to stop Lord Loic —"
"We'll just tell him we couldn't get close enough to do anything and that we had to adapt to the situation."
Wow, you're all beyond saving.
Then again, they were all militia from House Barielle and House Druille. It would have been silly of me to expect any of them to want to save me.
Loic's sword was glowing red, hot enough to cut through metal as if it were butter.
"Master," Luxion said again, disgusted that I was still pretending to be at a disadvantage. It no doubt irked him to see Arroganz losing.
"You don't know the meaning of patience, do you? The fun part hasn't even started yet."
The hulking Armor had managed to push Arroganz back, but as our weapons remained locked, I began increasing my engine's power output. Slowly, it was Loic who was being forced back.
"Is this stupid Armor's power waning?!" he gasped. "Dammit, you pile of junk!"
"Don't blame it on the machine. That's a fine suit. The problem is you."
Blue flames shot out of Arroganz's engine nozzle as it pressed the red Armor back. A sword popped out of the container on Arroganz's back, which I grabbed with my left hand before swinging it at Loic's blade.

“What?!” he gasped as his sword snapped. The broken blade plummeted through the air before stabbing into the ground below, white smoke rising from it.
“Your reaction speed is slow,” I said. “Like I said: It’s not the machine. It’s the pilot.”
I landed a kick, sending his suit spinning backward. He lacked the skill to maneuver it properly, so his stance was all wrong. I slung my battleaxe at him, timing it so that, just as he tried to get his bearings, it lopped off his left arm. Those watching below gasped in horror, but it might as well have been cheering to my ears.
“What a waste. Such a capable piece of equipment, but this is all it amounts to in the wrong hands. That old fart the Black Knight was far more intimidating than you. If he’d been piloting that thing, I’d have been in real trouble.”
The mere memory of him sent a chill down my spine. I’d screwed around and got my ass kicked for it. I never wanted to experience that again, but for necessity’s sake, I was pulling my punches in this fight.
“Man, it’s a good thing you’re my opponent. You may have the Sacred Tree’s blessing, but you’re basically a small fry. And heck, if you’re anything to go by, this whole blessing thing doesn’t amount to much, huh?!” I snickered, pissing off the crowd even more—which I only knew because of Luxion’s audio feed.
“Someone, please let me shoot him!”
“That bastard, how dare he taunt our best!”
“Requesting permission to attack that lowlife!”
Huh, so saying someone is a useless waste of space outside of their crest really strikes a nerve with the people here.
I would be sure to remember that.
The red Armor pulled itself back to its feet.
“Come on, show me what you’ve got,” I said, egging Loic on. “Or is this it? Where’s that Sacred Tree power you’re so proud of? Bring it on. I’ll be happy to fight you. Pull out all the stops and come at me! *Then* I’ll crush you!”
This was the correct way to put someone in their place—to use only the superior performance of your own machine to completely squash them even as they tried to come at you with everything they had.
The crest floating behind the red Armor swelled even larger, and flames poured out of it. It gathered the flames into an enormous fireball that it shot toward me, but I easily dodged. Despite being massive and receiving an immense amount of energy from Loic, the fireball had no speed, and there was no power behind it either. Size was all it had going for it, especially as Loic lacked the necessary control to make it count. Frankly, the thing hit me with the same force as a shower nozzle. The flames themselves might have been devastating, but given the blockage in the nozzle, they just couldn’t come out right.

Really, how pathetic.
“Seriously, this is all you’ve got? Calling you a disappointment would be an understatement. You don’t have any kind of hidden weapon or anything? I guess appearances can be deceiving. Wait—don’t tell me you’re all out of juice!” I chuckled.
Loic charged me, but I stowed my weapon away and stopped him with one hand. Although he clashed against me with force, he didn’t push me back even a hair’s breadth. In fact, disrupting his momentum put such a strain on his suit that parts of it broke off, its form warping, no doubt rattling Loic in the cockpit.
I kicked him away and pulled out a rifle. “I’m going after your right leg,” I told him as I took aim. “Either block my shot or get out of the way, but do something.”
“Khh!” he hissed, speeding away as he manifested his crest in front of him, intending to use it as a shield.
“I’ve already finished analyzing this shield pattern,” said Luxion.
I pulled the trigger and the bullet chased after Loic even as he tried to avoid it, piercing and destroying his right leg. Naturally, that meant it had gone straight through his shield as well.
“Th-that’s not possible! It went through the Sacred Tree’s blessing?!”
“Don’t delude yourself. Do you really think that other countries have been complacent? Of course we’ve been coming up with ways to circumvent your little tricks. Case in point, I just got past that blessing magic you’re so proud of.”
Okay, so that was all a lie, but it did the job of putting the republic on the alert.
“All right. Next is your right arm.”
Loic didn’t seem to believe me. He used his crest’s power to put up another shield, this time with three layers.
“You’re wasting your time,” said Luxion.
He was absolutely right. I pulled the trigger again, blasting Loic’s right arm off.
“Let’s keep up the pace! Next will be your left leg!”
Down below, everyone watching was shocked. I was proving that their ultimate weapon was flimsy as tissue paper—and that I could easily blast it into pieces.
“Seriously? You’re little more than target practice at this point. I heard republic Armors were super powerful, but I guess you guys don’t live up to the hype. If this is all you’ve got, we could invade tomorrow. Maybe I should recommend that to His Majesty. If we don’t hurry, you guys might be swept up by some other country first. Alzer is ripe for the picking after all!”
I continued blasting away at Loic’s Armor as I spoke, making the militia down below tremble in fear. After taking off Loic’s legs and arms, I finally approached him, grabbing his Armor by the head. I pressed the barrel of my rifle against his cockpit. “You really are a small fry. I can’t even begin to

express what a disappointment it is that *this* is all the Sacred Tree's blessing amounts to."
"D-dammit!" Loic cried in frustration.
I'm the one who's really frustrated here. If you'd been in your right mind and approached Noelle like a sane human being, I wouldn't have had to go to all this trouble. She would never have fallen for me in the first place. Being a little jealous is one thing, but you went way over the top.
"Maybe this is why Noelle hates you—because you're so weak," I said. "And despite your weakness, you tried to act big and got everyone else wrapped up in your mess. You're the real scumbag. I completely understand why Noelle detests you."
"What would you know about me?! What would you—I adore Noelle! *Love* her!"
"Well, too bad. She definitely doesn't adore, let alone love you. In fact, she's viscerally disgusted by you!"
Given the state Loic seemed to be in, I doubted my words even registered. Just imagining the girl I loved telling me she was disgusted with me in any capacity made me want to cry. If Angie or Livia ever said such a thing to me, I wasn't sure I would ever recover. Loic seemed to be in the same straits.
"It would never have been this way…if you hadn't appeared!" he howled.
"Yes, it would have been. Noelle wouldn't have picked you either way."
"I'll kill yoooou!"
Even though my gun was pressed against Loic's cockpit, he still struggled, not even entertaining the idea of begging for his life. He really was a pain in the butt. His spirit didn't seem likely to break at all. If anything, it was our audience who seemed on the verge of losing their spirit as they realized that even their strongest technology couldn't beat Arroganz. In fact, seeing how easily I had bested him without even trying made them realize their vulnerability.
"Master, Loic's Armor is starting to deteriorate. It's taken in too much energy and is on the verge of exploding. Please put distance between yourself and him."
"What? Hey, wait, can't we get Loic out of there first?!"
"He may already realize what is happening, but he doesn't seem to have any intention of running."
"Shit!"
I stowed my rifle before prying open the cockpit hatch of Loic's suit. I saw him glaring at me from inside, his grip on sanity completely lost.
"Get out of there, you big idiot!" I snapped.
He cackled. "Oh, no, you're coming with me. We're both going in flames. There won't be any pieces of you left to find!" Roots began growing out from his crest, ensnaring Arroganz.
"What?!"

“This is what you get for playing around,” Luxion fussed as he assumed control, locking me out. Arroganz ripped itself away from the roots entangling it. Then it shoved a hand inside the red suit, grabbing Loic and yanking him out of the cockpit. Smoke billowed out of the other Armor. Shortly after Arroganz kicked it away, it exploded. Arroganz shielded Loic from the blast with its hands, getting as much distance as it could.
Luxion paused. “That explosion packed more power than I expected.”
“That was a close one.”
“His crest output more energy than I thought possible. That concerns me.”
“Well, whatever. It’s over now.”
By the time we slowly made our way back to the ground, Loic had lost consciousness.

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When Loic woke, he found himself surrounded by soldiers.
“Where am I…?”
He was receiving treatment for his wounds, but the doctors shook their heads after taking a look at his right hand.
“Lord Bellange, I am afraid the young master has lost his crest.”
Bellange gazed coldly down at his son, but after a moment, he looked away.
“So he’s Unprotected now? Well, he wasn’t going to be of any use to me anymore anyway. I will make preparations to have him officially disinherited. Although, the bigger issue for now is cleaning up this mess.”
He stared at Arroganz, gritting his teeth.
It was bad enough that the republic’s airship technology had lost to the kingdom’s, but now their Armors had proven inferior as well. No, perhaps what really frustrated him was that the Six Great Houses had lost at all.
Loic lifted his upper body as the doctors continued treating him. Leon had approached with Noelle in tow. The other young lords from the kingdom were escorting them, as if acting as bodyguards. When Noelle came to a stop beside Loic, she knelt and looked directly into his eyes.
Loic glanced back at her, smile self-deprecating. “Come to have a good laugh? There’s much entertainment to be had, I’m sure, seeing how miserably I lost. I don’t even have the Sacred Tree’s blessing anymore. But mark my words, I won’t give up. Noelle, you still belong to—”
She slapped him across the face. Loic turned his head back to glare at her, but almost as quickly, he was left gaping.
“Wh-why are you crying?”
Tears trickled down her cheeks. Noelle turned her face away, but her voice rang out loud enough for all to hear. “Just so you know! I don’t hate you because you’re weak! At some point, Loic, you started treating me as an object. No matter what I did, you told me it ‘didn’t suit me’ and that you would ‘buy me something more expensive’!”

This had happened even before she started outright hating him. Once upon a time, the two had actually gotten along, and they'd happened to meet up in town and gone on something of a date. Loic had wanted her to become a woman worthy of someone in his position, so he'd needled her about every little thing she did.

From his perspective, it had merely been advice. "I-I only did that for your sake!"

"That's not what *I* wanted! I wanted something more normal. I wanted to enjoy our time together, to eat out, to go shopping. I wanted to have *fun*. And in spite of that, you rejected everything about me."

Loic paused, trying to remember their previous conversations. Once, Noelle said she wanted to ride on a boat, and he'd dismissed the idea, telling her he'd prepare an airship for her instead. When they'd gone out for a meal together, Noelle had wanted to pick a less pricey eatery, but Loic had refused, choosing to take them to a high-class restaurant instead. A similar incident occurred while they were shopping. Noelle picked an accessory she wanted, but Loic told her it was too cheap and personally selected something that was more his style to give her instead.

"We're not a good match," said Noelle. "I understood that from the beginning, and I had no intention of seriously dating you. But you kept trying to lead me around by the nose. You even slapped a collar on me—one I won't be able to take off for the rest of my life!"

The cursed object was still around her neck, although Leon now held the bracelet attached to it.

Noelle's eyes welled with sadness. "Loic, did you ever truly look at *me*? You were never okay with me as I was. I hated that…and that's why I started hating *you*."

Loic couldn't protest anything she said.

Albergue and Louise approached, accompanied by Emile and Lelia.

"Loic, do you even know what kinds of things I like?" Noelle asked.

He dropped his gaze. Even he was shocked to realize the truth: No. He didn't know a thing about what Noelle truly wanted.

Chapter 12:
Everyday Life

THE DAY AFTER wrecking Noelle's wedding, we returned to Marie's estate.
Noelle and I sat opposite one another in her room, where she promptly slapped me across the face. I could have avoided it, but I decided to take it like a man.
"Feel better now?" I asked.
"You really are the lowest of the low. You don't even give a crap about me, yet you come to save me like that? Don't get my hopes up!"
Her anger was rather complicated. She was grateful I had come to save her but annoyed because I already had fiancées of my own. I understood her feelings, though honestly, I struggled to understand why she'd even fallen for me.
What was with my sudden rise in popularity with the opposite sex? I'd never had any such luck in my previous life. Maybe to make up for it, I was getting double my share this time.
Noelle sobbed, wiping away her own tears with the backs of her hands.
"Don't give me hope. I want to forget my feelings for you, but if you do stuff like this, I won't be able to."
In less than a year, I would be returning to Holfort Kingdom. We still hadn't decided what to do with Noelle, but even if I did manage to take her back with me, the two of us couldn't be together.
"I'm sorry, but…even so, I wanted to save you."
Noelle shook her head. "No, I do want to express my gratitude. And I will—as many times as I need to! But…give me a break, would you? Falling for someone who's already engaged to two other girls is heartbreaking enough."
Seeing her weep made me want to reach out and embrace her, but I stopped myself. Even if I showered her with gentle words, that wouldn't actually help her. I could only apologize, and since I'd already done that, I excused myself, leaving her alone in her room.
Luxion and Cleare were hovering in the hallway, waiting for me.
"Oh? You're not going to embrace and console her?"
"You're such a bad boy, Master. I have mad respect for you!"
These two AIs, different as they were, were equally annoying as hell.
"Say whatever you want," I muttered. "Hey, Cleare, when are you going back?"
"ASAP! I'm sure the girls are worried too. I also need to check on some other mischief-makers as well."
"Mischief-makers? Who?" I quirked a brow.
"Oh, that's my little secret!"

What is she hiding? I felt the need to dig into that at some point, but if Cleare was heading back to the kingdom, I wanted to send some letters and gifts along with her. A number of preparations therefore needed to be made, so I started down the corridor with the two robots floating after me.
“As for Loic,” said Luxion, “he really did try to kill you, Master. Most of his actions were indirect attacks, I will admit, but there’s no doubt he was an unpleasant man to face.”
“Yeah, he was actually kinda terrifying. A little too capable, I’d say. Is it just me or are all the love interests in these games way too competent?”
I glanced into the inner courtyard to find Julius and the other boys having a barbecue. Julius was standing in front of a grill, handing out skewers to everyone.
“Yeah, this one is nice and juicy. Take it, Jilk.”
“I couldn’t possibly, Your Highness. You’ve been cooking for us this entire time. Allow me to trade places with you.”
“I’m doing this because I enjoy it. Don’t worry about it, just eat up.”
The lot of them had helped me infiltrate the Temple grounds, so I’d given them a temporary allowance as a bonus. They’d poured all of it into setting up a barbecue pit. It seemed they were having a good time.
Meanwhile, Marie sat nearby, gulping down a large mug of ice-cold beer.
“Aah, that hits the spot!”
Her ability to knock back alcohol was impressive. She looked like a teenage girl, but she drank and ate like a middle-aged man.
Carla brought Marie a couple of skewers. “Lady Marie, you certainly seem to be enjoying your drink! Here, have some of these. There’s plenty of meat to go around. And vegetables too!”
“Mwa ha ha! This is amazing! Carla, make sure to eat your fill as well. Better get some of the good stuff while you can. Never know what will happen next.”
“Yes, my lady!”
Why did I always feel like crying when I looked at Marie? It was hard to see anything beyond the tears welling up in my eyes.
Kyle normally never strayed far from the two girls, but at that moment he was busy dealing with Miss Yumeria.
“Look, Kyle! I brought us some skewers. Say ‘ah’!”
“I-I can eat them just fine by myself! Anyway, you need to stop gorging yourself on meat and start eating some vegetables too!”
He always got so hot and cold with her. I figured he didn’t want anyone to see the two of them acting too close, but whatever the reason, it still left Miss Yumeria dejected. I had a feeling Kyle wanted to be kinder to her, but he struggled too much with his own embarrassment to do it properly.
“Hah, puberty,” I said.
“The same thing you seem to be going through,” Luxion interjected.
I ignored him and turned my attention to Cordelia, who was standing in the courtyard with a disapproving look on her face. The five boys had once all

been prominent members of their houses, and she had a hard time accepting how far they'd fallen.
Jilk held a strange, cracked plate, upon which he placed his skewers.
Brad glanced over at his friend as he fed some scraps to his bird and rabbit.
"Jilk, that plate is little more than garbage, is it not?"
"How rude. You simply fail to understand its exquisite lineage."
"You know, I really didn't want to say this, but… Did you really succeed as an antique seller? Because I find the whole operation awfully suspicious."
"And what of you, Brad? It seems ludicrous to me that you had any success as a performer. Your magic tricks are ridiculously awful."
"Who cares if they're bad? The magic is a side act. What I'm really selling is a ticket to a show where they can witness my perfect existence."
I'd worried for these boys when I first heard that Marie had chased them out, but they'd survived the ordeal none the worse for wear. They had the vitality of a pack of cockroaches. If there was any notable change, it was that they'd each come back even more…unique than when they had left. Greg and Chris were particularly changed in that regard.
Chris glanced at Greg. "Why don't you put on some clothes?"
"Huh? I've got clothes on."
"What part of those briefs gracing your nethers qualify as proper clothes?"
"You dummy. Take a good look! See my amazing pecs?!" Greg struck a pose, his skin glimmering in the light.
Although Chris fussed at Greg over his man panties, he was little better, once again wearing a loincloth.
"That's basically underwear! And muscles do *not* count as clothing!"
"You don't have any room to talk! All *you've* got on is underwear!" Greg snapped.
"Now who's the dummy? I also have linen wrapped around my chest."
I almost wanted to interject "That's not the problem here," but I bit my tongue. No wonder Miss Cordelia was at such a loss.
Curiously, Julius looked the sanest of the bunch as he stood in front of the grill, sweating up a storm. That teenage boy grilling skewers was a far cry from the crown prince he'd once been.
Cordelia cleared her throat before saying, "Uh, um, Your Highness?"
"Yes?"
"Why have you been cooking this entire time? Will you not switch places with anyone?"
Julius removed the grill grate, scraping off the bits that had burnt onto the metal. "Everyone keeps asking me to switch off, but this is where I feel most comfortable. Besides, if I am to become a true barbecue pitmaster, I need many more years of experience. This is my opportunity to learn."
What an admirable…load of crap. What the hell was he saying?
Miss Cordelia eyed him coldly. "You are still a prince of Holfort Kingdom. You will never be permitted to become a 'barbecue pitmaster.'"
A logical thing to point out.

Julius clicked his tongs together. “I don’t see any problems with a prince who has mastered the art of barbecue. Do you?”
“Yes, I do,” she answered instantly.
Huh, I think maybe me and Miss Cordelia could learn to get along, considering we both possess some common sense.
As I stared down at them from the second story window, I felt silly. “They sure seem to be having a blast,” I muttered.
Cleare glanced at me. “Well then, why not invite Elle and go join them?”
“Moron. I’d just make things awkward if I did that. Anyway, I have some things to get done before you leave for Holfort. Come on, let’s get going.”
I dragged the robots along with me as I made my way to the harbor.

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The barbecue party didn’t end until that evening. At almost the exact same time, Louise arrived, and Marie left the others to keep her company. No sooner had Louise entered the estate than she requested to see Noelle. Marie obediently fetched the girl, but the atmosphere in the room was dismal. Marie wasn’t particularly close with Louise, and on top of that, Louise and Noelle weren’t on good terms either. As if to make matters worse, Noelle was still down in the dumps.
Is my brother really the type to make a run for it if he senses things are going south? Every single time crap like this happens, he disappears. Does he have a sixth sense for trouble or something? No, that can’t be it. He’s too useless to possess something like that.
As Marie preoccupied herself with her own thoughts, Louise breathed a sigh and stepped close to Noelle. She raised a hand…and the sound of skin connecting with skin echoed through the room.
Reaction a bit delayed, Noelle snapped, “Wh-what do you think you’re doing?!”
Louise stared back at her, smiling mockingly. “That pitiful ‘woe is me’ expression was begging for a slap. You truly are spoiled rotten. Do you have any idea how much effort Leon put into saving you?”
“W-well…that’s because he’s a nice person.”
“One doesn’t pick a fight with the entire republic simply because they’re *nice*. You truly are a brainless buffoon.”
Marie knew the truth of the matter. Leon had saved Noelle to avert a worldwide disaster. However, she hadn’t the least bit idea what he was thinking on the inside.
Knowing him, he might well just have saved Noelle because he felt sorry for her. Yet he won’t even bother responding to her feelings. He really is—and always has been—a scumbag.
He had done something similar in his previous life, though on a much smaller scale. Marie had made a point of not involving herself in his love life

since it pissed her off so much, but now that she thought back, he'd been pretty slow-witted then too.
Louise leaned in so close that her nose almost touched Noelle's. "I *hate* you. I hate your blissful existence, ignorant of everything else around you. Even now, you fail to realize how happy your life really is."
"You have no idea how much my sister and I struggled! And it's all your house's fault!"
"Oh, really? And who do you think you have to thank for being able to peacefully attend the academy even after your entire house fell to ruin? Don't tell me you honestly believe your house's retainers were able to hide your existence all on their own."
Noelle averted her gaze. "Well, I…I don't know anything about that. We were told to attend, so that's what we did."
Louise crossed her arms. "How truly insufferable. Although the most annoying person of all is Leon for having saved you. Tell me, what do you plan on doing now?"
Noelle lowered her gaze to the floor. "I haven't decided yet. I can't."
"For now, continue attending the academy as you have. My father said he'd permit that much. He also said you're free to go join Leon and the rest when they return to Holfort Kingdom. Although if you'd prefer to stay, that's fine too."
"What?" Noelle lifted her chin.
Louise shrugged. "Do whatever you like, in other words. Decide what you're going to do with yourself before Leon and his companions leave. That's all I came to say today." She marched out of the room.
Noelle stood there, frozen in her wake. However, Marie was the most troubled of them all.
The last boss and the villainess pitched in to save the protagonist?! What the heck is going on? Aaargh! I have no idea what's happening anymore! It would be so much easier if things were cut and dry, Marie thought as she raked her hands through her hair. But as things stood, she had no idea where the story would take them next.

***

After Cleare left, it took until the middle of their second term for things to settle down in the republic. Between the events in the first term and summer break, chaos had reigned for a good, long while. That subsequently derailed all the romantic events—to put it in otome game terms—that were supposed to happen at the school. Part of the blame for that lay with the Six Great Houses, who'd been responsible for the consecutive scandals.
I was sitting on the rooftop, enjoying some bread for lunch. I gave half of it to Marie as I chatted with Lelia. We were discussing what would come next—or we were supposed to be. It wasn't the most productive of conversations. As usual, Lelia was full of complaints.

“What are we going to do?! Seriously! It’s not long now until we get another extended holiday, but we already ruined all opportunities for the romance scenes at the school, so the story is completely off track!”
I went ahead and agreed with her, if only because it was my understanding that women didn’t respond well to logical arguments when they were angry. The way I heard it, the best way to react in these situations was to empathize.
“Yeah, sure does suck how things are going,” I said. “Hey, Marie, knock it off! Don’t scarf it all down!”
I had a small brown bag full of croissants, but it was nearly empty a few seconds after she got her paws on it.
“What?! Oh, sorry. I guess I started stuffing my face without thinking.”
Lelia scowled as the conversation got off topic. “This is all your fault!” she snapped. “Pierre’s gone, and now Loic’s gone too. You may have done well by disrupting Hugues’s engagement, but he hasn’t gotten any closer to my sister in the meantime. Professor Narcisse has been called away to help with his house, so he’s not even at the academy. Now what are we going to do?!”
Loic had used his injuries as an excuse to stop attending the academy. As for Hugues, they had cited him running off without Miss Louise at the Temple as a good reason to cancel their engagement. That was the public explanation at least. In reality, it was due to the fallout between Fernand and Mr. Albergue after the former turned traitor.
As the Six Great Houses dealt with the resulting turmoil of this clash, Professor Narcisse had been called back and loaded down with a bunch of duties. The nobles were scrambling to fix the mess they’d created. On top of smoothing over domestic problems, they had to settle things with other nations, as well as apologize to Holfort.
Lelia put her hands on her hips as she sat in front of us, trying to emphasize just how angry she was.
I snorted. Aw, how cute.
“Are you even listening?!”
“I hear you loud and clear. Basically, you have no idea how to deal with the last boss now, is that right?”
“Exactly. Now tell me: What *are* we going to do?”
As Lelia held her head in her hands, Luxion finally spoke up—though he barely had time to utter a single word before Lelia squeaked in surprise at his presence. He dutifully ignored her. “There is no reason for us to worry about that at this point. Master’s more pressing concern is what to do after the last boss has been dealt with.”
“What? What do you mean ‘after’?”
“I am still in the process of analyzing the Sacred Tree, but I believe my real body is fully capable of dealing with any of its attacks. What’s more important is how well we will be able to smooth over the chaos that follows.”

Lelia's eyes nearly bulged from her head. "Y-you can really handle the Sacred Tree?"
"Yes. I could sink this entire continent right now if commanded."
Lelia grabbed me by the collar. "Hey, what's all this about?! Explain yourself. That little robot thing is spewing some seriously terrifying threats! It almost sounds like you intend to sink the republic if things don't go to plan!"
There wasn't much I could say, considering Luxion had spoken the truth about his capabilities. Unable to come up with any better response, I decided to play it off with a laugh. "Aha ha ha!"
"Don't try to distract me! The fact that you're even trying means I've guessed correctly, right?! Can you really do that? Or I guess what I should be asking is—are you planning on making this little robot do that?!"
"Only if we are left with no other choice," Luxion faithfully responded. "I certainly have no qualms with doing it right now, but Master won't give me his approval."
"See? Nothing to worry about!" I said. "I want to resolve this in the best way possible, and I'll cooperate with you to that end. So you don't need to worry about the last boss. If all else fails, we'll handle it."
Marie continued munching on a croissant as she nodded. "Yup, so no need to fuss over it."
What are you, a barbarian? Don't talk with your mouth full.
Lelia put some distance between the two of us before dropping her gaze. "That means our entire country could be wiped out based on how you feel at any given moment."
"Give us a little more credit. We won't do something like that."
We tried to continue our discussion, but Lelia wouldn't listen to anything we had to say. Maybe we'd gone a little overboard on the threats?

***

Lelia's feet were heavy as she headed back home from the academy. Emile had offered to send her in his car, but she'd turned him down. She wanted to walk alone so she could work through her thoughts.
This is bad. Luxion is far more dangerous than I thought. Come to think of it, he's one of those cash shop items from the first game, right? No wonder he's out of his mind.
The first installment of the series had suffered from terrible balance issues. A player would have had to buy items from the cash shop to have any hope of clearing the story. Luxion had been a weapon the players could purchase—one with ridiculous specs.
I have no idea how to handle that thing. They could destroy the whole country at the drop of a hat, and if I don't watch myself, I might be caught up in that destruction.

Considering everything the republic had done to Leon, it wouldn't have been strange for him to harbor resentment. There was no telling when the dam holding it all back might burst. Worse, he was provoking the Six Great Houses. Lelia had no way to stop him, or them.

He basically told me there's an even more fearsome enemy for me to worry about than the last boss—him.

Leon literally controlled whether Lelia and everyone she knew lived or died. It was hard to relax in such a situation, especially since she trusted Leon about as far as she could throw him. He'd shown the extreme measures he was capable of when he went to such radical lengths to rescue Noelle.

Lelia was drowning in anxiety. With things as they are, I'd at least like a way to fight back, but…is any weapon in this country capable of opposing Luxion? Maybe if there was another cash shop item out there… But there's no way I could get ahold of one all on my own.

Unlike Holfort Kingdom's academy, the school in the republic didn't teach the basics of adventuring. Lelia had little in the way of combat expertise either, so acquiring a cash shop item on her own was out of the question.

But hey, wait a minute. I do know where one is. All I need to do is get my hands on it.

There had been one such item in the second installment of the game—one she hadn't yet retrieved.

As Lelia contemplated how she might acquire it, a man suddenly blocked her path. Despite the cool temperature, his shirt was unbuttoned, and beneath it, muscles peeked out. He was tall, with black, combed-back hair and a healthy tan.

He raised a hand to greet her. "Heya, Lelia. It's been a while."

"Serge!"

Serge Sara Rault—one of the five love interests.

Lelia gaped for a moment. "Wh-where have you been all this time?!"

“Were you worried about me? Happy to hear it. If you wanna hear my tales of derring-do, why don’t the two of us go out for a bite? It’ll take a while, though. My trip this time was a rough one.” He smiled. “I mean it about eating together, by the way. There’s no harm in it, right? It’s been a long time since we last saw each other.”
Despite Serge’s incredibly casual attitude, he was House Rault’s heir—Albergue’s adopted son. While a bit rough around the edges, Serge dreamed of becoming an adventurer, which meant he was a good man to rely on when it came to dangerous ambitions.
Suddenly, Lelia was struck with a thought. *That’s right! I can ask for Serge’s help!* She nodded. “All right. Let’s eat together then.”
Serge’s eyes widened. “That’s rare. I figured you’d turn me down flat. You really cool with this?”
“What? Do you not want to go with me?”
“Dummy! Of course I want to go with you! Anyway, what are you craving? Since it’s such a rare occasion, I’ll be happy to treat you to whatever.” Serge grinned.
Lelia inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. Thank goodness Serge developed an interest in me.
And so, they went off to enjoy dinner together.

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When Lelia returned home, Emile was there waiting for her. He’d gone so far as to have a meal prepared for them.
“Lelia, dinner is—”
“I already ate.”
“O-oh.”
“Sorry.”
She had returned to a mansion located near the school, which the Plevens had graciously prepared for her. It was far more spacious than her previous residence had been, and she and Emile had been spending their days together there. It housed only a few servants, but it wasn’t large enough to warrant any more than that. Emile was also highly attentive to her needs—he could cook and clean, and more importantly, he was kind. Lelia had no complaints about him at all.
But she did feel as though something was lacking.
He should have eaten without me. This just makes things awkward. Lelia shook her head. “Emile, about our next long break… Something came up. I won’t be able to go back with you to your family’s estate.”
“What? Really? But we planned it forever ago.”
“Please don’t ask any questions,” Lelia begged. Leon is too dangerous. No matter what it takes, I need to obtain the same level of power he has.

Lelia intended to go out adventuring with Serge as a way to combat the threat Leon posed, but she couldn't tell Emile as much. It would only put her in an awkward position if he asked for details.
Emile's face fell. "O-oh, all right. But let's at least leave early to say hello to everyone before you go off. My older brothers are waiting, and we have our future to discuss."
"Okay."
Having agreed to this compromise, Lelia retreated to her private room.

***

As Alzer's academy went on break, the *Licorne* arrived at the republic's harbor, its unmistakable white exterior making it stand out. Livia clambered down the exit ramp with an enormous travel bag in her hands. She paused to turn around, waving a hand at the companion behind her.
"Come on, Angie, hurry up!"
Angie was hauling her luggage along as well. She grinned at Livia. "No need to rush. Leon's not going anywhere."
They had set off for the republic as soon as vacation began, which had required them to sort out a variety of matters back home beforehand. Livia had barely slept a wink because she was so anxious for this day.
"I want to surprise him as soon as possible!"
"Okay, okay. I'm with you there." Angie had been all smiles from the moment they landed because she, too, was looking forward to this. The last time they'd come, they hadn't had an opportunity to really sightsee. This time, they intended to enjoy themselves.
Cleare glanced between them. "You girls are in high spirits. Meanwhile, those guys are drowning in work."
Angie followed the robot's gaze to see another kingdom airship.
"Yes, they do have their work cut out for them."
This time, theirs wasn't the only ship from Holfort—a number of them had arrived. Some were acting as Angie's bodyguards, but others carried high-ranking officials who had been dispatched to Alzer to engage in talks with the republic. Alzer had suffered repeated scandals, from Pierre to Loic. Holfort had been unwilling to keep quiet about this second one, and their dignitaries had made repeated visits to continue discussions. This time, they had sent high-ranking officials to finalize agreements.
"Leon's sure to be shocked this time," said Livia.
Angie nodded. "I bet he will be. Well, work aside, I do have some questions for him about what exactly went down here in Alzer. Not much information made it to us in the kingdom. Cleare won't give us any details either."
"Oh? Are you trying to pin the blame on me?" Cleare cooed. "I have my reasons, you know!"
"You're incorrigible," Angie said, still grinning. She paused when she spotted another ship landing in the harbor and furrowed her brows.

Livia tilted her head. “Is something wrong?”
“The Holy Kingdom of Rachel sure has an unusually large presence here.”

***

Our second term was at an end, which meant another long break was upon us. I took Noelle with me and left Marie’s estate. The reason? Miss Cordelia. She fussed at me, saying, “If you continue to stay here for weeks and months on end, you will only give Lady Angelica more reason to worry.” I couldn’t really argue the point with her, so I conceded.
It was the first time in a while I’d returned to my residence, and the rooms were covered in a fine layer of dust.
“Ugh, this is going to be a nightmare to clean.”
Miss Cordelia rolled up her sleeves. “Our first priority should be the bedroom and kitchen. I will begin by opening the windows so we aren’t suffocated by the dust. We’ll also need to hang the bedding so it can air out.”
Miss Yumeria hurried after her to help. I’d told Miss Cordelia she could stay at Marie’s estate, but she’d stubbornly refused, citing her role as a watchdog and maid. Her dedication to keeping an eye on me was admirable, save for the fact that those in the business of covert work weren’t usually supposed to openly out themselves like that.
Honestly, she’s so clueless, it’s adorable.
As the two women headed upstairs, Luxion stared at the baby bed we had left behind. I made my way over to him.
“Oh, yeah, I forgot we brought this thing in.”
Elle—uh, the dog that Jean owned, that was—had used this bed while in our care. With her gone, we had carried it down and left it with our other unused luggage.
Noelle’s face softened as she looked at it, the memories rushing back. “This is the one you used during summer break, isn’t it? I didn’t realize you left it here.”
Noelle still had that collar around her neck. She was finding ways to cover it up while she attended school, and she had returned to her previously cheerful self, but there was something forlorn about her.
“You sure you wouldn’t have been happier staying at Marie’s place?” I asked. “You really think it’s a good idea to be with me?”
She scratched her head. “That’s a blunt way of asking, and honestly, I did kind of want to stay there. Every day was fun, and Rie is always very kind to me.”
“What? Marie? Kind?”
“That’s right. She *is* kind. The only problem is… Well, you know. Whether I mean to or not, I keep intruding on her and those boys when they’re trying to have a moment together.”
Oh, yeah. I keep forgetting, but I guess those boys are Marie’s lovers.

That also meant one naturally walked in on them from time to time. Noelle had left partly out of consideration for them.
“Seemed to me like Marie didn’t want you to go, though,” I said.
She’d been practically inconsolable after she heard that Noelle would be leaving, on top of Miss Cordelia and Miss Yumeria—namely because all three had helped her around the house. She did have more servants now than she had previously, but there weren’t enough to cover all the chores. Plus, that mansion was ridiculously huge. All that said, if Noelle still wanted to come live with me, there was no need to refuse her.
“Well, it’s fine, I guess.”
Noelle folded her arms behind her back, her cheeks coloring. “Hey, Leon… When men travel, it’s not uncommon for them to have a girl in every country. Did you know that?”
I could find no words with which to respond.
Noelle giggled. “I think I’d be fine with being your girl while you’re here. What do you think?”
As a man, I found the offer enticing enough, but would Noelle really be happy with that?
“Are you sure that’s really what you want? You wouldn’t regret it later?”
Noelle’s face fell. “Sorry. I don’t know if I can go through with it. It was embarrassing to even mention in the first place, and it kind of bums me out to think about it.”
“I figured. Let’s keep the line drawn at friends, then.”
We were already more-than-friends but less-than-lovers…and it felt like there was nowhere else for us to go from there.
Luxion waited quietly while we finished our conversation before turning to Noelle. “I have a report, if you don’t mind.”
“Wh-what?! If you were there this whole time, you should have said something!” Noelle grumbled.
Luxion turned his gaze to my left arm. I had attached the bracelet to my wrist in order to secure Noelle’s safety, but I’d never had any reason to use it.
“I have discovered a way to remove your collar.”
He’d only just figured it out? Seriously? “Sure took you a while,” I said.
“Yes, due to safety concerns. I actually discovered a way to remove it immediately, but I had to research a few more to ensure I identified the way least liable to cause injury. The best technique—which will cause the least burden to your bodies—would be to manifest the chain, then sever it.”
“Doesn’t sound that complicated to me.”
Noelle agreed. “In that case, we should have done it sooner.”
“A reckless application of power will cause the collar to tighten. In other words, it would take off your head.”
“Uh, is this really going to be okay, then?” Noelle asked, her eyes filled with fear. “And you said this is the *safest* method of removal?”

“I located a spot in the chain that will not trigger said effect. If we destroy it at that precise point, we can safely remove the collar. I have already perfectly mapped it out.”
I glanced at Noelle. “Well? Want to get that thing off?”
She hummed thoughtfully. “Actually, I think maybe I’m fine leaving it the way it is—and that’s not the fear speaking.”
“Huh?!”
“B-because it’s one of the only things I have that really ties me to you, Leon.”
The way she said that was adorable, but if anyone else heard it, they would have gotten the impression that I was into some really kinky stuff. People who knew the collar was a cursed item would take one look at it, notice the bracelet on my wrist, and shake their heads in disgust.
“No,” I said. “It’ll only get in the way while you’re trying to live your daily life. We’re taking it off.”
She pouted. “Meanie.”
“The weak point is the link closest to the collar,” said Luxion. “Master, pull the chain and I will use a tool to sever it.”
“Got it.”
I manifested the chain, drew it taut, and waited for Luxion to do his cutting. It was awkward just standing there. Nervous, Noelle snapped her eyes shut. My heart started pounding for some reason.
“Very well. I will leave to retrieve said tool, then. I left it on the *Einhorn*, so it will be a moment before I return with it,” said Luxion.
“You could’ve said that sooner!”
“You were the one who assumed I had it with me without bothering to ask. I digress, I will be back momentarily.” Luxion floated out the window, heading toward the *Einhorn*.
Noelle and I exchanged glances before breathing a sigh.
I cleared my throat. “Uh, sorry, I thought we could get it off immediately.”
“It’s fine. I misunderstood him too.” She gripped the chain and jangled it. “You know, I don’t really think much about this thing around my neck, but seeing the chain attached to it really drives home the fact that it’s a collar.”
Now that she mentioned it, this did suddenly feel a bit…lewd. “Yeah. It’s kinda kinky.”
“Leon, you perv.”
“Is this where I’m supposed to say, ‘And? What’s wrong with that?’” I lifted my hands, groping at the air as I inched closer to her.
Noelle wrapped her arms around her chest and pulled away. “Dummy—why would you do that in broad daylight?” But she was grinning despite herself.
I was glad we could joke at a time like this. It helped lighten the air.
Suddenly, the door swung open, and Miss Cordelia’s cold gaze landed on me.
“Lord Leon, just what do you think you’re doing?”
“Huh? I’m only messing around like I always do,” I said with a chuckle.

The door opened wider to reveal she wasn’t alone. Miss Yumeria was standing there with the sapling in her arms, trembling. But the bigger issue was the other two behind her.
Livia was smiling eerily. She pressed her hands together and tilted her head to the side. “Oh? So you’re always messing around like this, hm?”
“L-Livia!”
Angie was there as well, but she wore an impassive poker face.
“I’m here too, you know,” she said. “I remember now that we didn’t visit this house before. I never dreamed it was because you were hiding something from us here.”
“H-hiding something?! What do you—ack!”
They were both staring at the baby bed.
As if this misunderstanding wasn’t already bad enough, their eyes then turned to the chain linking Noelle’s collar to my bracelet.
Livia’s grin spread wider—which only made it that much more terrifying.
“Mr. Leon, would you care to explain that?”
“W-well, you see, this is—”
I paused midway through trying to introduce Noelle when I realized I was about to step on a land mine—metaphorically speaking.
During my first term here, I’d cared for Jean’s elderly dog while he was hospitalized, and her name had happened to be Noelle. The girl beside me? Also named Noelle. The only problem was that I’d never told Livia and Angie about Elle—the dog—passing away. I’d thought it would only cause them undue concern. Now, however, I was regretting my choice.

Noelle pulled a face. “Um, I’m Noelle. Noelle Beltre, that is. Leon and I attend the academy together. Uh, wait. Didn’t I introduce myself to everyone last time?”
Yes, she had, in fact. And that made this whole situation much worse. She’d just poured a whole bucket of fuel on the fire.
“That’s right,” said Angie. “We did meet before at Marie’s place. Wait—Noelle, you said? Aha. Now I see what’s going on. How silly of me not to have noticed before.” Her lips peeled back in a smile.
Miss Cordelia stood a little straighter. She then retreated a few steps back, trying to slip away from anyone’s notice.
Stop right there! Don’t you dare run off and leave me behind!
“Noelle…” Livia murmured. “I thought that was the name of a seventeen-year-old dog. Now it makes sense. I was mistaken this whole time—you were talking about a human, not an animal.”
“No, no! There really was a dog here, I swear!”
“I never realized you were into this kind of thing,” Livia said with a solemn expression.
Cold sweat poured down my face.
Angie’s gaze turned to the baby bed. “So, you were trying to build a little nest for yourself and this Noelle, huh? I never dreamed you would secretly share news about your lover in your letters to us. You’re cleverer than I gave you credit for, Leon.”
It sounded like a compliment, but I was pretty sure it wasn’t. Angie’s eyes were burning with rage. If I made one more wrong step, she was likely to explode—literally, I feared.
Shit! I can feel a chill running down my spine! Even if I wanted to make excuses, the deck was already stacked against me.
“Miss Noelle,” said Livia, “we met you before, didn’t we? I thought something was strange back then. You did know that Mr. Leon was already engaged to us, didn’t you?”
Noelle hung her head. “I-I’m sorry.”
Wait! Don’t apologize! We need to correct their misunderstanding first!
I sucked in a breath.
That’s right! If Noelle will just tell them that they’re mistaken, it will… Wait, will it actually resolve anything?
I looked at Cordelia, hoping for help, but she averted her eyes.
Is she seriously going to abandon me now, when I really need her?! Come to think of it, she always gave me cold looks before!
I turned my pleading gaze to Miss Yumeria. Her lips parted and closed as she tried to form the words to offer me a defense. “Uh, um… Lord Leon crashed Miss Noelle’s wedding and kidnapped her! Then the two grew even closer, and um…” She was too disoriented to offer any coherent explanation, and it only amounted to, once again, more fuel on the already raging fire.
Nope, I don’t think that was fuel. She literally threw a bomb into the blaze.

I appreciated that she was trying to help, but alas, it only made the misunderstanding worse.
Angie furrowed her brows. “You kidnapped her during her wedding? Leon, I expect you have a good explanation for all of this. And while we’re at it, you can tell us about your bedroom preferences as well, since we *are* your fiancées.”
“You must be really in love with Miss Noelle if you went so far as to buy a baby bed for her,” said Livia.
Wait, what? Did neither of them know anything about what had been happening here? Sure, I’d been keeping communication to a bare minimum, but Cleare *had* gone back home to them. Hadn’t she told them anything?
There was one other thing I found conspicuously suspicious. Why hadn’t Luxion informed me that the two of them were on the way? Knowing him, he’d known they were coming well before they arrived. Even more suspicious was the timing with which he disappeared.
“It was a trap. You laid this trap for me, Luxion!” I howled.
Livia and Angie pressed their faces close to mine.
“Leon, you’re going to tell us everything.”
“That’s right, Mr. Leon, because this time, you’ve done an extra big no-no!”
This had been set up to make it look like I was cheating. Those rotten AIs had totally betrayed me, and my own actions had compounded to make the situation that much worse.
I’m totally screwed now, aren’t I?!

Epilogue

"YOU LAID THIS TRAP FOR ME, Luxion!" Leon's voice echoed through the manor, and Luxion watched it all from the safety of a monitor screen.
"Master, I believe you said before that it's one's own fault if they fall for a trap. That applies perfectly to this situation as well."
Luxion was floating on top of the *Einhorn*'s deck, Cleare floating directly across from him.
"You're no less cruel than he is," she said.
"You think so?"
Luxion had ordered her not to share any details with the girls when she returned. One might wonder: Why would he do such a thing? Well, that was entirely Leon's fault.
"All's well that ends well, as the humans say. Had I not intervened, Master seemed content to let the Sacred Tree Sapling slip through his fingers. That is a most valuable sample."
Cleare couldn't argue with that. "I agree," she said. "But the fact that you engineered this misunderstanding simply so you could drag it back home to the kingdom makes you a demon."
"Both Master and Noelle intended to keep their feelings hidden. I see nothing wrong with my methods. Master will be all the happier for it in the end, and we will have this precious sample close at hand so we can properly investigate it."
Luxion showed Cleare the data he had already discerned—information he'd gathered while he'd been in the republic. He hadn't yet informed Leon, but he'd identified something particularly suspicious beneath the base of the Sacred Tree. Yet even with all of his technology, Luxion couldn't conduct any further research on it.
"It's rare that you're unable to look into something," said Cleare.
"I suspect it's the ruins of a military base created by the old humans. It's possible the Sacred Tree might have grown over it."
"Oh, seriously? One of our companions might be locked inside, then."
"Yes. Furthermore, the Sacred Tree appears to be incomplete."
"Hm, I think I'm starting to see the bigger picture."
Their discussion was still pure speculation at this stage, but they suspected the tree was an artificial creation. Cleare found the topic most fascinating.
"Hard to believe we may have had an old human base lurking under us this whole time. Now that I think about it, a tree with a will of its own that extends blessings to humans—that certainly doesn't seem like something that would occur naturally."
It was all too convenient, for one thing.
"But what do you mean about it being incomplete?" Cleare asked.

“The reason saplings wilt and die is because the Sacred Tree fails to provide the magical energy they need to grow. These saplings crop up with some frequency only to wilt and fade away—because the Sacred Tree kills them off.”
“That’s true. That is unnatural behavior for a plant. Although since it has such a long life, maybe it’s pruning them, waiting for a strong offspring to come along to nurture?”
“When Loic and Master were locked in battle, I detected evidence that suggested the Sacred Tree had intentionally aligned itself with Loic. It was almost as if it was trying to give him power because it wanted to destroy its sapling’s protector.”
Cleare analyzed the data he had gathered during the incident as she asked, “Are you sure he didn’t just make an oath to the tree that allowed him to used the observed amount of power?”
“There was no such reaction to indicate as much.”
The Sacred Tree brought great blessings to its people, but it had one key flaw that set it apart from other living things: It didn’t seek to increase the population of its species, instead actively obstructing its own propagation. Why would it do such a thing? Neither Luxion nor Cleare could come up with an easy explanation, and that only fueled Cleare’s interest.
“It absorbs magical energy to fuel its growth… From the standpoint of the old humans, that would be a convenient trait, since it would decrease the density of atmospheric mana. That makes me wonder—did they actually leave it behind?”
“Impossible to say as of now.”
That lack of surety was precisely why Luxion was so anxious to keep the sapling close. He also wanted to investigate the Priestess—that was, Noelle. To that end, he considered it ideal to have both remain close to Leon.
“Aren’t you using Master, in that case?” asked Cleare.
“What would make you think that?”
“You sure made a mess of things just so you could look into the sapling more.”
“Oh? I simply thought that if Angie knew of their circumstances, the chances of her inviting Noelle back to the kingdom would increase. That would reduce Master’s concerns as well, if I’m not mistaken.”
“Yeah, well, right now, said Master is in some serious trouble.”
On screen, Leon was still screaming. He was struggling with the girls, having been backed into a corner with nowhere else to run.
“Luxion, you bastard! You’ll pay for this, I swear! Wait… No, I don’t mean you girls! No, I’m not blaming him for not helping me hide things from you. That’s not it. He’s the one who knew you were coming beforehand and—what? If I’d known sooner, you think I would have hidden the evidence? N-no! Somebody help! I don’t even care if it’s Cleare!”
Irked at this last condescension, Cleare felt no obligation to intervene on his behalf. “How heartless! Humph! I hope they give you an earful.”

“I must agree. He needs to take a long, hard look at himself.”
The two robots derived far too much enjoyment from their master’s suffering.
After watching from the sidelines for a bit, Cleare finally turned to Luxion.
“Oh, that’s right. Did you look into what happened with you-know-what?”
“I have no evidence yet, but I believe my suspicions are correct.”
Cleare was referring to how House Rault had managed to beat House Lespinasse. The latter had supposedly borne a more powerful crest, so Luxion wondered how they could have possibly lost to their inferiors. Thus, he had elected to investigate.
“You see, I suspect both the Priestess and Guardian lost their crests prior to the attack by House Rault,” said Luxion.

***

Back in Holfort Kingdom, at the palace, King Roland was parked at his desk. Dark, heavy circles lay under his eyes, and he’d fallen asleep at some point, leaving a trail of drool on the documents beneath him. When he woke, he quickly wiped his chin before cursing under his breath.
“That damn brat. This is turning into his daily routine!”
Right when he thought they’d finally tied up the last incident, the officials they’d sent before the second term suddenly rushed back to Holfort. Their reason? “Earl Bartfort started a fight with House Barielle!”
House Barielle was one of the most powerful families in the Alzer Republic. According to the report, Leon had metaphorically kicked the hornets’ nest, but no sooner had they gotten word than another dignitary arrived with an official apology from House Barielle and the republic.
What in the world was happening over there? Roland couldn’t even begin to imagine. There was one thing, however, that he did know. He clutched his head in his hands. He could already picture Leon, grinning like an idiot, mocking him. Leon—who had in recent days given Roland endless grief.
“Damn hiiiim! All I can see is that annoying, smirking face—it doesn’t matter if I’m asleep or awake. Why do I have to drown in all this anxiety because of that buffoon?! He’s going to regret this. I swear I’ll make him pay.”
No one had ever made Roland squirm like Leon had. Even while he was far away in a foreign country, he remained a thorn in Roland’s side. The king couldn’t let such an affront slide.
“I want to see that stupid grin contort into despair! How can I do it? What could I do that he would absolutely hate?”
Promoting him again wasn’t going to be enough. There had to be something more. Roland racked his brain, striving to think of something he could do to make Leon truly writhe in agony.
“You’re going to get yours, you brat! I swear I’ll have my revenge!”

Afterword

THANK YOU for purchasing the fifth volume of this series! I am the author, Yomu Mishima.

This was basically like a continuation of the Alzer Republic Arc, I guess you could say. It's pretty obvious that Noelle is our main heroine in this volume, but I'm curious what you readers think of the idiot brigade this time around. Even Marie and Leon were disgusted when they came back even quirkier than they had left.

I kept Chris's depiction the same in the light novel as the web novel, but I decided to crank up the wackiness even more with Greg. I hope you enjoyed the change. Although, what I really want you all to enjoy is Noelle. In the previous volume, while she did appear, she was overshadowed by Marie. Marie really is—how to put this… Why is she so popular? I understand I added elements to her character that could appeal to people, but in Volume 4, she beat Leon for first place in popularity. He won overall popularity, but Marie overtook him for that one volume. She sure is impressive—outpacing the hero and the heroine in a single book.

The extra web story included with the Japanese volumes that depict Marie's route also appear to be popular too, which had me gasping in surprise. I'm happy, of course, but…seriously? Well, I guess if everyone enjoys them, that's all the more reason for me to keep writing them. They're easy to churn out too. As usual, I have outdone myself with the length and far exceeded what you'd expect of an extra. Even I am impressed with how much I wrote. This volume also includes another continuation of that side story, so I hope you will all enjoy it.*

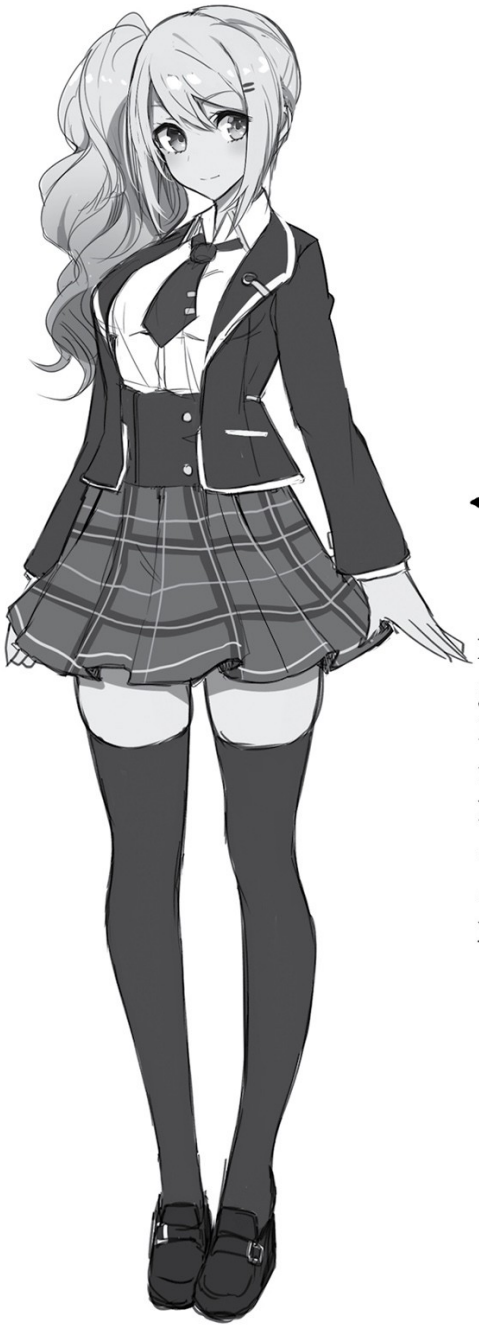
Which reminds me, I haven't written anything for Noelle. I guess I should remedy that. She is super cute! I love her side ponytail!

Anyway, that's all from me. I will work hard to write the next volume as well, so I hope you will all continue to support me!

** Currently only available in Japanese.*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

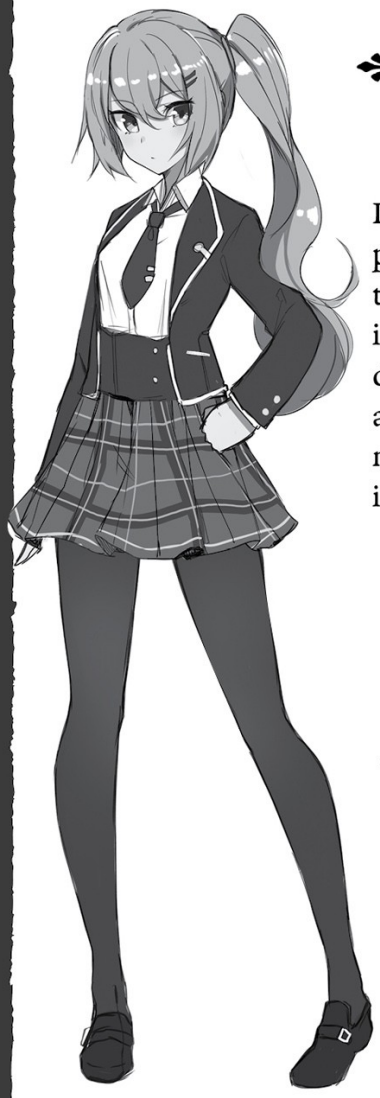
ALZER REPUBLIC



NOELLE BELTRE

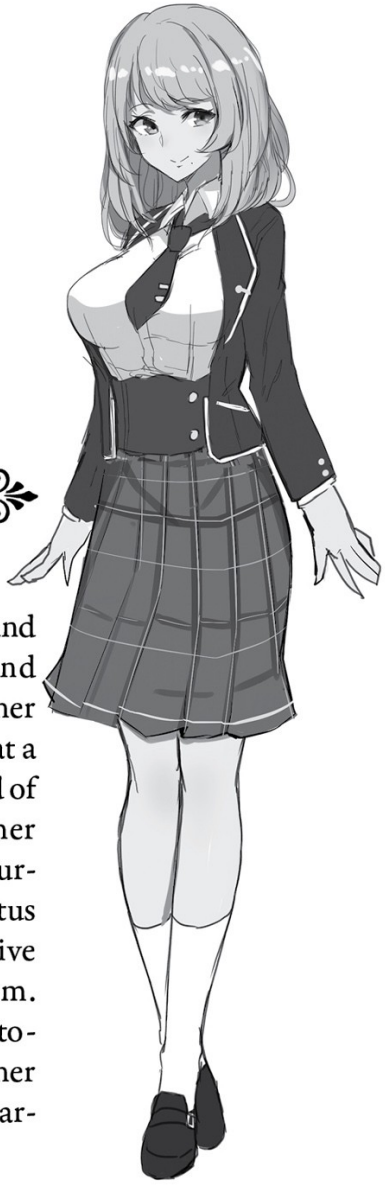
Heroine of the second game. The developers learned from their mistakes with Livia and made Noelle more energetic and candid. Skilled at house chores as well as cooking. Lelia's older twin.

ALZER REPUBLIC



LELIA BELTRE

Played the game in her previous life and retains some memory of it. Hates bad ends and didn't bother playing any of them, which means there are holes in her knowledge.



LOUISE SARA RAULT

Daughter of Albergue and villainess of the second game. Deeply cared for her little brother who died at a young age. Knows ahead of time that Noelle and her sister are Lespinasse survivors and uses her status to apply pressure to drive others away from them. Shows great kindness toward Leon, who shares her deceased sibling's appearance and name.

THE WORLD OF OTOMIE GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS.

LOIC LETA BARIELLE

Heir to House Barielle, one of the Six Great Houses. Obsessed with Noelle and gets pissed off when she doesn't give him any attention. Tends to be yandere and leans toward violence when the object of his affections gets on his bad side.

ALBERGUE SARA RAULT

Leader of one of the Six Great Houses. In the game, he is the main antagonist. Father to Louise, who serves as the villainess.

HUGUES TOALA DRUILLE

A love interest in the second game who is obsessed with his older brother. Second son of House Druille, who was set to marry Louise.

FERNAND TOALA DRUILLE

Leader of one of the Six Great Houses. A secret character in the game with special requirements the player must meet to pursue his route.

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